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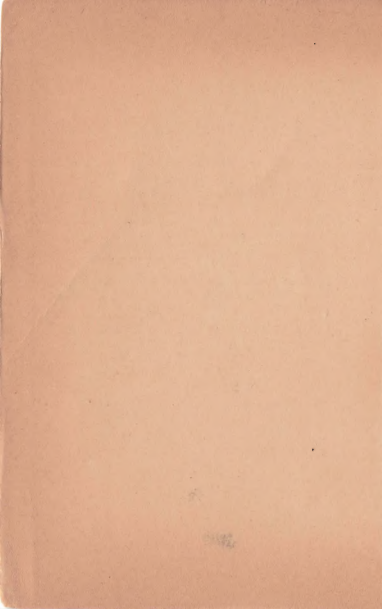
HE TACKLED A GANG
OF LAND GRABBERS!

THE Tenderfoot

W. H. B. KENT



A BANTAM BOOK
Complete and Unabridged



*A DEAD MAN ON THE FIRST PAGE
A THRILL ON EVERY PAGE*

Could Pete Stirling—tenderfoot cowhand—survive this rugged life? Could this dandy from New York match wits—and triggers—with the coolest hands in the Southwest? And could Pete cope with the roughest welcome any newcomer to the Territory ever received?

Before Pete learns to hold a gun properly, lead is thrown his way. Before Pete knows who owns what territory, he's accused of land grabbing. And before you get ten pages into the wildest Western W. H. B. Kent ever wrote, you'll know that Pete must either learn—or die—in this shooting, fighting, hard riding thrill-a-minute yarn that's got everything, and Arizona too.

About THE COVER

Artist Bob Doares is no tenderfoot; he lived in the Southwest—in New Mexico and Arizona—for three years. But when it came to painting a picture of a bucking, rearing piece of horseflesh, he remembered . . . a racehorse at the starting post, at the Empire City Track!

The
TENDERFOOT

by

W. H. B. KENT

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THE TENDERFOOT

CAST OF CHARACTERS

PETE STIRLING: He was green as they come when he climbed off a flea-bitten gray mare at the Arrowhead ranch.

IDAHO: The last murderer Idaho came across he killed . . . just twisted his head until the neck broke.

FRED: Range boss of Arrowhead, he was born in a thunderstorm, and it soured him.

FOOTLESS: He thought the tenderfoot was really the slickest gunman in the Territory of Arizona.

FLACK: He was a mild-mannered fellow, with three hired killers carrying out his mild-mannered orders.

PANHANDLE: His right hand hung close to the butt of his six-shooter, fingers twitching like the tail of a hunting cat.

SCARFACE: A thin-lipped, cold-eyed killer, he was the first to test the tenderfoot's courage.

WHITEY: His high girlish giggle sent the chill of fear into a man's bones.

GAIL: She wanted her homestead and her man, but she was too proud to do anything about either.

SATURNINO: An Arrowhead hand, he shadowed the tenderfoot.

CHAPTER I

It took me a long time to realize that the man was dead. I wondered, at first, why he did not brush the flies off his face. Then I saw the blue hole in the middle of his forehead.

I had climbed down off a flea-bitten gray mare in front of the long adobe bunkhouse of the Arrowhead outfit. Coming up from the creek I had passed a maze of corrals. Horses in one of them stopped dozing for a moment to turn their heads and stare at me.

Beyond the corrals were sheds and the bunkhouse. An arrowhead had been burned deeply into the partly open door—the brand of the outfit. Up a slight rise the long, low white-washed ranch house glittered in the sun of Arizona Territory. Along the front of the house flamed a long row of hollyhocks. This, I learned later, was out of keeping with the country and the people—a woman's touch.

From out back somewhere came the rattle of pans and dishes. My new saddle creaked as I climbed down, somewhat stiff and very self-conscious in my new chaps, high-heeled boots, spurs and belt, and six-shooter. It was the first day I had ever worn such a rig. I walked up two steps and pushed open the door of the bunkhouse.

Coming from the searing sunlight of southern Arizona I was half blind in the dusky gloom of the bunkhouse. Gradually I made out beds here and there along the walls and helter-skelter through the room. Opposite the door was a

blackened fireplace. Several rifles were leaning in the corner where the rocks jutted out from the wall. Between me and the fireplace was a table, and on it two kerosene lamps with smoke-blackened chimneys, some ragged magazines, a broken spur, and a half-filled box of .44-.40 Winchester rifle cartridges. A worn pack of cards was scattered over everything on the table as though thrown down by some one going away hurriedly.

A great bluebottle fly was buzzing and banging at the dusty panes of the windows. Then I saw the man.

He was on one of the beds, lying on a jumble of blankets, his head and shoulders propped up against the wooden headboard. His long legs were straight out in front of him, and his arms down by his sides, open hands turned up, eyes half open.

I wondered at the flies crawling on his face. I started to say "Hello" but only croaked, and the hair on the back of my neck crawled.

The half-open eyes stared at me without any expression. I saw the round blue hole in the middle of his forehead.

My knees trembled and I reached back for the door, then stumbled backward into the blistering Arizona sunlight.

The gray mare still stood there, one hip dropped, head lowered over the sagging reins. She was completely indifferent. I felt, suddenly, an overpowering desire to mount the mare and ride—ride in a wild run away out of the country.

Voices came from the front door of the main house. A man stepped out and a voice followed him: a woman's voice, young, throaty, warm. She laughed and said, "Oh, Idaho, you are gorgeous."

The man spoke angrily, "You heard me," and came away from the house.

Beyond the man I saw a young woman standing in the door, looking down at me, smiling after the man. Then she went back in and a door slammed.

The man came toward me, his long shanked spurs rattling. Blue jeans were tucked into high-heeled boots and both hands were shoved down inside his gun belt. A sweeping white mustache fell either side of a heavy, clean-shaven chin. I saw a big nose and gray, warm, amused eyes.

Dishes rattled again somewhere out back and the man asked me, "Well, bub, what's on your mind?"

It was incongruous, shocking to me that things went on in the world, a world apparently indifferent, amused—the man dead there in the bunkhouse.

The amused gray eyes swept over my new outfit, and I knew the old man had placed me: an easterner, just come to the country, a *tenderfoot*.

My voice croaked and failed, and then I got out, "There's a man in there."

The gray eyes flickered. The man chuckled. "Well," he said, "after all, it's the bunkhouse."

I gulped and told him, "But the man is dead!"

For a long time the gray eyes stared at me and changed from amusement to the gray glitter of moonlit ice. In two long strides the old man was up in the bunkhouse. Slowly, nervously, I followed.

I leaned back against the wall and watched the old man. He stood with his hands again shoved inside his gun belt. After a while he lifted the head forward, examined the back of it, and stared a long time at the wooden headboard of the bed. He let the dead head back, gently, then came over and stood in front of me, pulling at his long white mustache with one hand, looking at me thoughtfully.

Without a word he reached down and pulled out my forty-five Colt six-shooter, sniffed at it and ran the end of his little finger into the muzzle. It came out black.

I told him, "I shot at a jack rabbit."

He said "Hum" and handed me the six-shooter, butt first.

The cold eyes staring at me made me nervous, uneasy. I

started to say something and then listened to quick steps. A young woman came into the room, talking, and then stopped. Her eyes widened, she said "Oh!" and looked from the old man to me. Then in a startled voice she asked, "What is it?"

The old man moved toward her, hiding the dead man, talking casually, "Nothing at all, Gail, nothing at all."

The girl stood in the doorway, her back against the hot sunshine. I saw a heavy mass of black hair, a faintly aquiline tanned face, and wide eyes that were black. I was a little shocked at the fact that she wore blue jeans over high-heeled boots. The boots were incredibly small.

She looked again back and forth from the old man to me, repeating a little impatiently, "What is it, Idaho?"

Then her eyes became accustomed to the gloom of the bunkhouse and she made out something on the bed. She stepped swiftly around old Idaho to the bed.

Idaho mumbled, "Well, I suppose you got to know some time."

The girl gave a startled exclamation then put a clenched hand to her mouth. She said, "It's Joe!" and looked down at the dead man a long time.

It seemed to me that her straight back sagged. The big bluebottle fly filled the room with a great racket as it banged along the windowpane.

Idaho walked over to the bed, pulled the body away from the headboard, and covered it with a red blanket.

The girl asked, "Who did it?" And not waiting for an answer she spoke in a dreary voice, "Oh, I was hoping there would never be anything like that again."

Old Idaho shrugged his shoulders.

The girl came away from the bed and asked sharply, "Who did it?"

Idaho jerked his head toward me. "He said he found him like this."

Then the girl turned to me, directly, for the first time. I

saw, now, that the wide eyes were the deepest blue in the world. She looked me over, sharply, intently. I felt myself flushing and was annoyed.

She said, surprisingly, "Fiddlesticks!"

The old man said, "Mebbeso," and then began teetering up and down on his high heels, his frosty eyes looking me over.

I was acutely conscious of my brand-new outfit, the big hat, the red neck scarf, the chaps, boots, spurs, and six-shooter, all new—and all suddenly very much out of place. I did not belong, and knew it.

The girl sat down on the edge of a bed, crossed her knees, and leaned forward, cupping her firm chin in one hand and looking at me quite impersonally. Old Idaho asked, "Well, what about you?"

I started to say something and then waited, listening to the sound of fast-stepping horses. The girl said, "Here are some of the boys." Men's voices came in to us, somebody laughed. The laugh came as a shock. It was unthinkable that any one should be so casual and carefree.

The horses stopped, bits rattled, and saddles creaked as men dismounted. Four men crowded into the room, blinking their eyes against the gloom. Spurs rattled, chaps rustled. A man beat at the white dust on his shoulders with a pair of gloves. Their black-handled six-shooters sagged from heavy belts. Light glinted on rows of little brass cylinders. The young fellow beating at the dust spoke to old Idaho. "Hi, old dry-belt." Then: "Hi, Gail. How's the old lady?"

Into that casual, cheerful meeting the girl dropped the words, "Somebody killed Joe!"

Motion and talking stopped instantly. The fly was still banging at the windowpane. Then a man saw the form under the blanket, walked over, and flipped the blanket back. The other three went and looked. The man covered Joe, and they all looked at old Idaho.

Idaho jerked his head at me beside the door. "He said he rode up here and found him like that."

They all turned.

Leaning there against the wall I had a feeling of desperate loneliness. Those five strange men and the girl, all silently staring at me. My romantic idea of going West, of learning the cow business, now seemed silly. I didn't want to learn the cow business. I wanted to be back in New York, to dress in the clothes I was used to, to come downstairs to a leisurely breakfast with old Paulson the butler standing by, and then to ride downtown to the bank with my father handling the reins and making casual remarks.

One of the men, burly and with a reddish stubble of beard, spat a long string of tobacco juice into the fireplace and remarked in a surly tone, "I figured somebody would ketch up with Joe."

Idaho said, "We got to figure on this. Sit down."

The men wandered around and sat down on the beds. There was a chair near me, against the wall, and I sat down.

A man with a short grizzled mustache and a black hat tipped his head back to look out from under the wide brim and ask Idaho, "Where was the killing?"

Idaho pulled at his sweeping white mustache and shook his head. "I dunno, Fred," he said. "Killed outside somewhere and brought in here."

Fred fixed hard eyes on me. He was older than the rest, except Idaho. He asked, "What you kill him for?"

I spoke quietly. "I didn't kill him."

Idaho spoke to me. "S'pose you tell us about you, bub."

The old man was not unfriendly. I turned in relief from the hard, hostile eyes of Fred.

"I came to Tucson last week," I told him. "Saturday I came up to Sacaton City on the stage, stayed there over Sunday, and this morning hired a horse and rode up here."

The youngest man grinned and said, "A mare." Nobody paid any attention.

The hostile-eyed Fred asked, "What's your name?"

I told him, "Peter Stirling," and thought with sick longing of what the name would mean back home: the name alone would settle anything. It meant nothing at all to these hard-eyed men.

Then I blurted out: "I came out here to learn the cattle business. They told me in Sacaton City this would be a good place to work if I could get a job here." It sounded silly. I realized I was sweating.

The hard-eyed Fred asked, "Where you come from?"

I told him, "New York."

The young fellow snickered and said, "My, my, think of that! From New York."

Angrily I snarled back at the young fellow, "Now go on and ask me that old one, 'Who runs the hotel there now?'"

The young fellow grinned amiably as he asked, "Well, who does?"

Idaho said, "Shut up, Slim."

Slim continued grinning. I realized he was quite friendly. I regretted my rage and mumbled, "Sorry."

Slim was tall, lanky, with blue eyes and yellow hair. I thought he was about my own age—twenty-three. For all his lankiness he had an air of swift competence. I liked him.

Fred tipped his head back to ask, "You jest rode up here and found Joe dead?" Then he snorted with disbelief.

I went over again what I had told Idaho when he first came down to the bunkhouse. Then they looked at one another, their eyes traveling around the room and then back to me. I couldn't make out what they thought except that Fred was obviously skeptical.

My eyes moved around the group, keeping, for some reason, away from the girl. Old Idaho was still pulling at his

mustache, looking at me without seeing me. Fred was eyeing me from under his black hat, plainly hostile. The burly man with the reddish beard was sitting handy to the fireplace paying no attention. He seemed to be bored. I learned later his name was Garvey.

Beside Slim, on the bed, was a young fellow who had not spoken. He had a big silver-trimmed Mexican sombrero, a thin black mustache, and large dark eyes. When I looked at him he flashed white teeth in a gay, friendly smile. I thought he was a Mexican, and was grateful for the smile.

Slim had rolled a brown-paper cigarette, felt in his pockets, and then complained, "Saturnino, you got my matches."

Saturnino flashed his gay smile, "But yes," he said, and gave Slim a square block of sulphur matches.

Idaho's eyes came back into the room. He said, "Joe was killed somewhere outside and brought in here." He added, "Curious." Then he asked Fred, "You boys all come together?"

Fred tipped his head back and nodded. "Yeah. We all left the herd at daylight and rode in here together." Then he glanced at me. "The tenderfoot ain't explained much."

Suddenly the girl spoke, sharply. She said, "Fiddlesticks!"

Saturnino nodded and smiled. Slim grinned and blew smoke out of his nose.

The girl was still sitting with her firm chin cupped in her hand. She looked at me and asked, "You want a job?"

I thought that what I wanted was to get out of there, to go away, to go back to New York where I belonged. It seemed to me it was some one else who stammered and answered, "Yes."

The girl's deep-blue eyes held mine for an instant. She spoke briskly. "All right, you're hired."

Fred protested, "Aw, now, Gail—" but she paid no attention to him.

Slim grinned. "Mebbeso he's real good with a shovel."

At the mention of a shovel Saturnino laughed out loud, and I saw a little smile in the girl's eyes. Then they sobered quickly as Idaho gave orders.

I listened to Idaho and at the same time wondered at the fact that it was the girl who said I was hired and the men seemed to accept it.

Idaho was saying: "Might as well bury Joe right off. It's hot. Then we'll have to spread out and cut sign. Find out where he was killed." He turned to Slim. "You Slim—"

There was the sound of another horse coming to the bunkhouse. A man grunted and climbed off.

Idaho pulled the door open and looked out. He grunted, "Oh, it's you, is it?"

A short heavy man came in and peered around in the gloom. In a hearty genial voice he said, "Howdy, folks. How's the Arrowhead?" Then he made out the girl and ducked his head. "Howdy, Gail. Does me good just to look at you."

I knew the man and disliked him. His name was Flack. He was short and very heavy. At first you could think he was fat, but there was no fat on him. He had practically no neck, and both the front and the back of his head were flat. He turned his head very little. He merely shifted his eyes around in his flat face.

I had seen him in the hotel in Tucson and had also been with him all day on the stage coming up from Tucson to Sacaton City. He had said he was a trader and would "buy anything or sell anything." I realized after a while that he had pumped me quite dry as to all my affairs. I disliked him—disliked his powerful body, his prying questions, and the way he flicked his expressionless eyes around in his flat face.

Flack was quite genial in his manner as though assuming that everybody liked him. His eyes moved around the room and he spoke to Garvey over by the fireplace. "Hello, Garvey," he said. "So you're up here now?"

Garvey spat and answered in his surly voice, "You see me, don't you?"

Flack said, "Well, there ain't no better place to work in Arizona Territory."

His eyes flicked across the dead body under the blanket and came around to me. He showed surprise.

I had the feeling he had known all the time that I was there. He said, "Well, well, here's the coming cowman! How are you?"

Slim broke in with, "He's sick."

Saturnino laughed. Fred tipped his head back to ask, "So you know the stranger?"

Flack said, "Sure I do. Old friends. He and I rode up in the stage together Saturday. All day coming up to Sacaton."

Slim asked me, "Did he sell you the stage?"

Flack gave his curious laugh. There was no mirth in it. It was as though he said "Ha-ha" and could turn it on or off any time. He said, "Slim's a great joker. Don't let him get your goat."

Slim said, "If Flack didn't sell you the stage or the Sacaton River or the Southern Pacific Railroad you must be a Yankee."

Idaho said, "Shut up, Slim." Then he spoke to Flack. "Somebody shot Joe."

Flack's eyes narrowed. He said, "The hell!" Then, "Who done it?"

Idaho said, "That's what we'd like to know."

He went over the whole tiresome matter again. Flack took the trouble to explain that he had left Sacaton City after I did, had in fact tried to catch up to me but I had too much start. He had come up, he said, to see about some Arrowhead beef for his army contract. And he would want more later for his Indian Reservation contract.

Somebody began beating on an iron contrivance, and from out back came a hoarse shout. Everybody in the room got up, and I realized it was noon. I saw Slim unbuckle his gun belt

and hang it on a bedpost. I did the same with mine. Slim grinned at me, "That's right," he said. "It ain't eteckwet to wear your guns to the dinner table."

CHAPTER II

AT THE door the blistering sun of Arizona hit my eyes like a hot iron. I heard Idaho order, "Put them horses in the corral, Manuel."

A slim, dark-faced lad walked away with bridles over his arm and snorting horses crowding impatiently on his heels.

Across a space of open dirt in front of the bunkhouse I could see into the cool shade of a grove of cottonwoods. The trees were in rows, and as we went I could look down the long shady isles. The dusty leaves were quite still in the breathless noonday heat.

Spurs rattled as we walked up a slight slope. I blinked my eyes at the white glare from the main ranch house on the left. It was one story, of whitewashed adobe, and seemed to spread all over the place. The hollyhocks along the front were bright with flaming color.

The girl was going away toward the front of the house, her spurs rattling as she stepped briskly along. I was very conscious of her blue-jean overalls. I thought that was a very sensible way for a woman to dress to ride. I thought of my younger sister, riding the bridle paths in Central Park or at the farm on Long Island: my sister, in long flowing riding habit and sidesaddle and stiff hat with an ostrich feather. I

wondered what she would think of this girl, Gail Gordon. I said the name over and over to myself: "Gail Gordon—Gail Gordon."

A man stood beside a wagon tire that was suspended from a crossbeam over two upright posts. The man had a flour-sack apron over a big belly. He had a wooden leg from the knee down, ending in a brassbound peg. In a husky voice he asked, "How many you saddle bums I feeding today?" He began counting on his fingers.

Flack said, "Howdy, Footless."

The cook said, "Hunh," whirled his good leg around the peg, and bobbed away to another long, low adobe building.

I thought "Footless" was a cruel name to give the one-legged cook. Then I was astonished at the mirthful gleam and quick understanding in the dark eyes of Saturnino. He spread his hands and laughed. "But no," he told me. "It is not because of the leg they call him 'Footless,' it is because of the head."

There was a long row of tin washbasins on a bench under the porch roof and a series of roller towels—the long towels all in one piece hung over a roller you twirl around and around hoping to find a dry place.

In the cookhouse was a long table with benches for seats. The table was covered with oilcloths. The dishes were heavy crockery, all placed upside down on the long table. It seemed to me there was room for fifty men at the table.

It was noisy as the men got over the benches to sit at the table and slammed over the heavy plates, cups, and saucers. The girl, I saw, was not there.

The men devoted themselves to their food, greedily, noisily. Great chunks of boiled beef and potatoes, beans, bread, butter, and coffee. There was fresh milk for the coffee—I learned, long after, that fresh milk and butter was a luxury on an Arizona cattle ranch. It was not a social meal. They came there to eat.

After a while Fred took a quill from his vest pocket and began picking his teeth. Garvey began belching. Idaho asked, "Hear any shooting, Footless?"

Footless turned around from the stove and asked, "Hunh?" Then he said, "Naw, I ain't heard who shot him."

Fred asked, "Who told you?"

Footless said, "Manuel."

Slim said, "That Indian kid knows everything before it happens."

We got away from the benches and trooped out into the hot sunlight.

Footless yelled, "Hey, Idaho. How many is feeding here tonight?"

Idaho said: "Dunno, Footless. Jest us here now, I guess." He started to say something to the rest of us, but Flack broke in:

"How about that beef, Idaho? I'm needing five hundred head, what with both the army and the Indians. I heard you had gathered for a shipment. How about letting me have five hundred?"

Idaho looked at Flack and asked, "Run of the herd?"

Flack said, "Sure."

Idaho said, "All right. But I ain't combing the herd for you."

Flack said, "That's all right. I can trust you."

Slim snickered.

Idaho said, "Where you want 'em? The boys are driving to Tucson by way of the river. They'll be down on the river tomorrow."

Flack nodded. "That will just suit me. I got some of my boys in Sacaton City, and they can take delivery down on the river tomorrow. That's fine."

Idaho spoke to Slim. "Slim, you get a pick and shovel and take—" Then he looked at me and asked, "What you say your name is?"

I told him, "Peter Stirling."

Slim added, "Of New York."

Idaho went on, "Take Pete up on the hill and have him dig a grave. Alongside those others. Then you get back here and we'll spread out and find out what happened to Joe."

I followed Slim to a toolhouse, and the rest went off toward the bunkhouse. I thought they all had gone until I found Flack talking softly directly behind me. He was almost whispering. He said, "I took a liking to you, Peter, and I'll help you all I can."

I turned, astonished, and saw his eyes flick toward Slim and then toward the others, all going away from us. They came back to me, and I saw again how completely expressionless they were. "What do you mean, help me?" I asked.

He nodded in a secretive way. "You see how you are fixed here: whether you killed Joe or not, they will pin it on you. Fred's dead certain you did it. He's range boss and got a lot to say. If we act quick I can get you away."

"But I didn't kill him!" I spoke angrily.

Flick was soothing. "Sure. Sure." Then he said: "You go on up with Slim. I'll wait till the rest are out of sight, then I'll get an extra horse and be down in the cottonwood grove. Pretty soon you just walk down, to get a drink like, and then slip into the grove." He eyed me a minute and then added, "It's your only chance."

I met his expressionless eyes and, exasperated, half yelled at him, "You go to hell."

I wanted to know where I stood, at least with Slim. I had taken a liking to him. When he came blinking out of the toolhouse I told him, hotly, "Flack says you all think I did kill Joe."

Slim looked at me, and his slow grin crinkled up his eyes. "You never killed nobody. Not yet." As we started up a rocky slope he threw over his shoulder: "Don't mind Fred. He was born in a thunderstorm, and it soured him."

Up on the top of the low ridge behind the house I saw several graves. Some of them had rough slabs of white limestone at their heads with crude chiseling. On one was: "John Gordon, 1830—1881." I thought to myself, "Nine years ago."

Slim was making marks on the ground with the pick, talking as he worked. "That's old J. G.," he said, "Gail's father."

I was surprised at the sadness in his voice as he added, "She was ten years old walking alongside of him in Sacaton City when he was shot and killed."

I muttered, "God!" Then I asked, "What happened to the man who killed him?"

"Idaho killed him," Slim answered, "with his hands. Twisted his head till his neck broke."

After a minute Slim brightened up. "There you are." He pointed to the scratches on the ground. "Dig it like that."

"How deep?" I asked.

Slim grinned as he started away. "Jest keep on digging."

The ground was a fine gravel, baked hard as concrete. It seemed to me the pick bounded back without making any impression. I was glad that I was a crew man, and in training. My hands were hard, and I was going to need rowing muscles. They hadn't mentioned what my pay was to be. I thought I had heard somewhere that a cowpuncher drew thirty dollars a month and found; but probably I was not worth that. I began to wonder what digging a grave had to do with learning the cattle business.

It seemed impossible that it was only a month since my last boat race at New London. I remembered my father's amusement, and pleasure, when I suddenly decided to go West instead of to Europe for a year. And I smiled as I remembered Sister Jane's eager face telling me goodbye at the station. "And don't bring back any prairie queen, Petey," she had said. "I've got a girl for you. I'll keep her on ice until you get back." The mention of a woman and ice did not seem to me a happy combination.

I slugged away at the hole. I was making an impression. The sun was hot on my back—it seemed to burn through my shirt as though I was naked. And I was thirsty.

I began thinking about Flack again. It seemed to me there was something wrong about him, but perhaps that was because I disliked him. Then I remembered that, coming up on the stage from Tucson, he had twice referred to the Land Office in Tucson and asked what interested me there. I had explained there was nothing in particular. I had noticed the sign, "U.S. Land Office," and had gone in out of curiosity. A genial old gentleman with a white goatee and a southern accent had explained about taking up land, about homesteads and timber claims and proving up. I distinctly had the idea that Flack was interested, and suspicious; but I couldn't see why. I wondered if he believed I had killed Joe. I gave up, and went back to digging a grave.

It seemed to me I dug in that flintlike ground for hours, weeks, years. My back was lame and sore, and it hurt to stand up. My mouth was dry, and my tongue thick. I dropped the tools and started for the house and water.

The shade at the back of the cookhouse was heaven. I drank and drank from a red earthenware jar hanging in the shade. The jar was covered with burlap, and water dripped from it. I took a canteen from the nail in the wall, filled it, and went back up the hill. Down to the right, somewhere among the sheds and buildings, a man was hammering nails into boards. Footless, I thought, building a coffin.

After I got down a foot it was easier to dig. Up here I could see out. There was nothing halfway about this country. It was fascinating, utterly beautiful, or it was incredibly desolate, whichever way you looked at it. Back of me, to the north was the Sacaton Range. The gaunt ribs of the mountains swept up the black belt of the pines and emerged in grim crags of black rock. Below, the pines were grayish green of the juniper forest. The acrid smell of the junipers came

down to me. Below the forest were clumps of short live oaks. Gray sage and the greenish black greasewood covered the foothills and ran down to the flatlands. Off south were the stark, naked hills of old Mexico.

Around to the right, off to the west, I could see the thin strip of green along the Sacaton River; and, beyond, the desert heaved and shimmered in the heat. Away off at the end of the world to the west was a thin dark line: whether clouds or hills, I did not know.

Directly below, a sparkling stream came out of the hills, swept around the ranch, and ran straight south. I could follow its course to where, down in Mexico, it turned west and then back north to become the Sacaton River and, at long last, to sink in the sands away beyond Tucson.

The sprawling buildings of the Arrowhead outfit were directly below: buildings, sheds, and corrals seemingly thrown down haphazard. Beyond the buildings was the grove of cottonwoods, and beyond that I could see the startling green of one corner of the alfalfa field.

It was a land of vivid colors, all black and white or red or gray. In that clear dry air you can see an incredible distance. And in all that vast distance I could see no living thing.

My canteen was empty and I went down the hill again. Long black shadows were creeping out from under the hills. My arms were sore from the shock of the pick in the hard ground. My back ached.

Filling the canteen once more I heard Fred yell, "Hey, Garvey! Shake a leg."

Garvey came out of the cookhouse. As he passed me he spat a stream of tobacco juice between my feet. Starting back up the hill, I passed Garvey, and he spat again very close to my feet. I saw red.

"Now look," I told him. "If one drop hits me I'll beat your damn face to a pulp!"

Garvey whirled and looked at me. I thought there was sur-

prise in his bloodshot eyes. Then they squinted and hardened. "Yeah?" he asked.

The silky voice of Saturnino came to me. "And me," Saturnino purred, "me, I watch that pulp affair with a great delight."

Garvey turned quickly toward Saturnino, his hand dropping toward his gun. He spat again and said, "Better watch yourself, Mex."

Saturnino's swift stride was like a cat. I could see his face now, cold and cruel. He tapped Garvey's chest with a long slim finger and told him, "The next time Mister Garvey wishes to call me 'Mex' he will talk through smoke."

They stood frozen, immobile, going into each other with hating eyes. Shivers ran up my back. I thought, Good God, what a country!

Fred yelled again, "Damn you, Garvey."

Garvey walked away toward the bunkhouse. A minute later I saw Fred and Garvey ride away toward the hills.

I heard Slim snicker, and turned to see him leaning against the cookhouse, smoke drifting from his nose. He drawled: "My, my, Mex! You shouldn't let your angry passions rise."

Frightened, I looked at Saturnino. He flashed a gay smile at Slim. "That Garvey," he spoke indulgently. "I think it must be I slap his ears down some time."

Slim grinned at me and jabbed a finger toward Saturnino. "Saturnino," he said, "is a Californio."

Well, I thought, I'm learning. Slim can call Saturnino "Mex" and it's all right, but if Garvey does, it is a killing matter.

Slim asked, "How's the last resting place of our dear Joe coming along?" They followed me up the hill. Slim looked at the hole and seemed surprised. "You're a right active digger," he said. Saturnino got down in the hole with the pick, and Slim squatted on his heels and rolled another cigarette.

"What did you find about Joe?" I asked.

"Not nothing, really," Slim answered. "Joe was cleaning out the ditches. We seen where he went a little way up the slope, set down and rolled a cigarette. He left the empty tobacco bag there, then started for the bunkhouse after more. We trailed him to the corrals; but after that, on the hard gravel, we couldn't find nothing." He spoke thoughtfully. "So we know Joe was alive when he went past the corrals. He was killed somewhere between the corrals and the bed where you seen him."

"But there must have been something," I protested. "Wasn't there any blood?"

Slim shook his head. "Nary blood."

Then he looked at me quite seriously and asked, "How'd you do it, anyway?"

Suddenly I again felt helpless, hopeless. I was going to say something when Saturnino smiled up at me. "Don't mind the Slim one," he said. I looked back at Slim and he was grinning. "Jest the same," he spoke with a worried air, "jest the same, I can't figure it."

It came to me that they were all more worried over the how and why than over the fact of Joe's death. They did not seem to care much that Joe had been shot and killed, but they were intensely anxious to know how and why. I wondered at their callous attitude but shrugged it off. Probably they were used to sudden and violent death.

Slim said: "I'll throw out the dirt, and then it'll be all right. We can fill it with rocks."

Startled, I asked, "Rocks? Why?"

Slim said, "Wolves."

We started down the hill, Slim remarking, "I reckon Footless will have him all fixed up by now."

"But look," I protested. "Don't you have to notify somebody? Aren't there any police or a coroner or a sheriff or something?"

"Police." Slim turned the word over as if it was new to

him. Then he brightened. "Sure," he said, "all kinds. There is the City Marshal in Tucson, there's the Sheriff, and U.S. Marshal, and the Territory Rangers, and there's soldiers. Sure," he grinned, "plenty police. Take your pick." He added, "But this ain't none of their business."

"Where did Flack go?" I asked.

Slim shrugged. "Jest charging sand, I reckon. Sacaton City, and tomorrow down-river to the beef herd."

"Is that where Fred and Garvey went?"

Slim nodded.

"How many Arrowhead men are there?"

Slim began to name names and count. "That makes eight," he said, "and Fred and Garvey makes ten. And Saturnino and me makes twelve." Suddenly he stopped and looked at me. "And, hell!" he grinned. "You make thirteen." He was watching Saturnino with an amused glint in his eyes.

Saturnino had stopped and was looking at us with serious concern. He made a clucking noise as though he was sorry about something.

Slim laughed out loud. "It's all right, Saturnino," he said. "Footless makes fourteen, and there's Idaho and Manuel."

Saturnino looked relieved. Slim laughed out loud.

"Saturnino ain't superstitious," he said. "He jest knows a lot of things that ain't so."

Saturnino shook his head with the air of one who could tell strange things if he would.

The burying of Joe, like their attitude over his death, seemed to me quite callous. Idaho, Saturnino, Slim, and I carried the rough board box up the hill and lowered it into the grave. Footless came up behind us, and a slim young lad with opaque black eyes and long coarse hair tied back with a red cloth band around his forehead. The girl was not there.

There was no ceremony of any sort. We all gathered rocks to fill the grave. Dirt was piled up and hammered down with the shovel. That was all.

On the way down I realized that the sun was very low. It had dropped behind the great shoulders of the mountains, and the ranch was in shadow. Off south, way out in the flatlands the leprous white of an alkali flat glistened in the slanting rays of the sun. The far-off peaks in old Mexico were turning to a dusky violet.

Footless hammered on the iron tire and hitched briskly into the cookhouse. We were washing in the tin basins on the long shelf. I spoke to Idaho. "If I'm going to stay here I'll have to get that hired horse back to the livery stable. And I left some things in the hotel there."

Idaho looked at me from one eye around the towel. The girl spoke from the doorway. "That's all right," she said. "I own the livery stable. We'll turn the mare out." She added, "Footless is going in with a wagon tomorrow and can get your things."

I said, "Thanks," but she had gone.

In the bunkhouse that night there were four of us: Slim, Saturnino, the Indian lad Manuel, and myself.

The blankets smelled of horses and men, but I was very glad to go to bed. In the dim light of the kerosene lamp I saw Slim playing solitaire with the ragged cards. Before I dozed off I heard him say: "I don't get it. I don't get it."

I knew what he meant: how and why Joe was killed. I intended to think about it but could see only a firm chin cupped in a slim hand and brooding dark blue eyes.

CHAPTER III

THE NEXT morning Idaho told me: "Well, Bub, you might as well ride to town with me and get your stuff. Footless is going in with the buckboard." He spoke to Slim. "Are the horses in the corral? Pick out a couple for Peter's string."

The girl spoke. "And, Slim—"

Slim said, "Yes, ma'm."

Gail Gordon said, "No tricks."

Slim's eyes opened wide in injured astonishment. "Why, Gail, ma'm," he protested, "you know I wouldn't do nothing like that."

There was a smile lurking around the corners of her mouth as she said, "You heard me."

Slim asked me, "You used to horses?"

I said, "Yes," and started to brag but stopped. As a matter of fact I had ridden all my life on the farm on Long Island and, of course, in Central Park in town. I said, "But not wild ones."

Slim said, "They're easy, after you get used to 'em. You don't think nothing about it. 'Lessen one rolls on you and busts your leg all up like happened to Footless."

Slim roped a dark dappled gray and pointed out a slim sorrel. "How's them two?" he asked. I wondered if they had been part of Joe's string.

Saturnino was holding the heads of two wild looking buckskins while Footless climbed into the seat of the buckboard.

Lootless said, "Turn 'em loose!" The two horses stood straight up on their hind legs. They came down, snorting, jumped forward together, and disappeared into the cottonwood grove. Long after they had gone we could hear the wild galloping hoofs and the rattle and bang of the buckboard.

Slim said, "Come on, Saturnino, we got to comb this cottonwood grove." He yelled, "Manuel!"

The Indian lad appeared suddenly at his elbow. I was surprised to see that the expressionless face of the Indian boy was turned up to Slim with an affectionate smile.

Slim pointed into the grove and told the lad, "Sick 'em, Manuel."

I knew they were still hunting for some sign of how, and why, Joc had been killed. I wished I could stay with them.

A lane led straight down from the main ranch house through the cottonwood grove. The heart-shaped leaves on the tall trees hung still and lifeless. Dust hung in the air from the passage of the buckboard. The level rays of the early sun slanted through the trees. Already it was hot.

Idaho watched me with critical eyes. He asked, "You used to horses?"

I said, "Yes. But not to these saddles."

Idaho merely grunted as though he had already forgotten his question. As a matter of fact I didn't like the stock saddle—not as a saddle. Too heavy, and the stirrups too far back. You were stuck on them like a clothespin. The McClellan, the army saddle, I thought was far better, as they say, for "both man and beast." But of course in handling cattle, in roping, you had to have the weight, the horn, so as to stand up to your work.

We came out of the shade of the trees, and the sun of Arizona hit us like a blow from something solid.

We turned to the right, to the west, as the road angled up a long slope. Below to the left was the almost incredible green of an alfalfa field. Below that, a field of half-grown corn

stood still and green. The river sparkled in the sunlight. Over the summit, the long hill, and all sign of human habitation disappeared. Except the road of gray, landscape rolled away to the distant mountains empty and desolate.

We rode at a lope on and on, mile after mile. The smell of sage and of dust was in my nostrils. The faint haze of dust that hung in the still air thickened, and soon we heard the rattle of the buckboard. The horses were going at a stiff trot down the long slope to the flatlands.

As we rode around the buckboard I saw Footless sitting half sideways, his right foot on the brake bar. The peg of his leg was stuck in a tin can nailed to the floor of the wagon. Footless paid no attention to us, but the team flattened their ears and looked wild-eyed as we rode past.

Away across the flats to the west little boxes, dolls' playhouses, were Sacaton City.

At the edge of town the Tucson road came in, dusty, well traveled. We turned sharp to the left, pounded the planks of a bridge over a dry arroyo, and rode into Sacaton City.

The one street was wide and deep with dust. There were only a few buildings—some of adobe, the others of boards mostly unpainted, as the paint had been ground off by the sand of desert winds. On the left was the yawning cavern of the livery stable with a sign "Arrowhead Corral." I remembered the girl had said, "I own that."

Opposite the livery barn was a long building with a loading platform and a sign, "Arrowhead Trading Co.," on its false front. I wondered if she owned that too.

There were vacant lots and no sidewalks. Farther up the street were the hotel, the New York Restaurant, and the Palace Saloon. In front of these were boardwalks at different levels, so that in passing from one to another you went up or down a step or two. There was no living thing in sight.

Idaho and I rode into the cool gloom of the livery barn. A man came out of the darkness and said, "Howdy, Idaho."

Idaho said, "Howdy," and we slid off the horses. The man looked at me and said, "So you found your way all right."

I said, "Yes." Then I told him, "They turned that gray mare out."

The man grinned and said, "I was hoping they would."

Idaho said: "I got business. Get your war bag and put it in the buckboard. See you at the Chink's come feed time."

Idaho walked out into the sunlight and crossed the road to the Sacaton Trading Co. The screen door slammed behind him. I heard a rattle and pound on the bridge and saw the buckboard coming into town. I got my suitcase and kit bag from the hotel and took them to the livery barn.

Footless said, "Hey, I'm thirsty. Come on." He hitched along up the street and I followed him.

The Palace Saloon was dark and cool and smelled of beer and whisky. It was a long room with a scuffed-up board floor and three big kerosene lamps hanging from the ceiling. The huge tin lamp reflectors were black with fly specks. Along the wall at the right were roulette and faro tables, covered with black oilcloth. Against the wall back of each table were the high chairs for the lookout.

In the back end of the room were round tables and chairs. On the left the bar ran halfway down the room. There was a glass cigar showcase between the bar and the front window. Back of the bar was a long mirror and piles of glasses.

The fat barkeep said, "Hello, Footless."

Footless hitched up to the bar and jerked a dirty thumb at me. "Meet Peter Stirling." As an afterthought he added, "From New York."

I heard a man snicker.

My back stiffened but I started to look that way. Then I looked at the barkeep instead. He was smiling pleasantly and put out a fat hand. We shook hands. He said, "We're old friends."

I liked the barkeep. I had had a long talk with him, and

several whiskies, the Sunday before. It was he, in fact, who had advised me to try for a job with the Arrowhead outfit.

The barkeep asked, "What'll you have?"

Footless asked, "What you got?"

The barkeep laughed and said: "Whisky. The beer wagon will be in from Tucson some time today."

Footless seemed to think it over and finally decided, "Let's have some whisky."

The barkeep set up some glasses and slid a bottle of whisky, upright, along the bar. Footless filled his glass, made a quick motion with his hand, and the drink was gone. He blinked, "Hunh," and poured another.

I remembered what it was like and drank more cautiously. I shivered a little and heard the snicker again. I looked along the mirror and met three pairs of cold, expressionless eyes. They looked away.

I looked past Footless and saw that the three men at the end of the bar were now looking directly at me. As soon as they met my eyes they looked away again. They stood there quietly, drinking, their elbows hooked on the bar. They were a hard-looking trio. Their chaps and clothes were old, worn, and dusty. Their gun belts were loose, hanging down their legs. They had, however, recently been shaved, evidently after a long time as their jaws were whiter than their cheekbones.

They were alike in one thing—they had thin-lipped mouths and cold, hard eyes. The one in the middle, a short, slight young fellow, had the lightest-colored hair I ever saw. Almost albino. Even his eyelashes were whitish.

One of them spoke softly. "I hear that gal up there is giving house room to strays."

The other tall one said, "Yeah, and from New York at that."

The one in the middle, the white one, giggled. It was a high, almost girlish giggle. It was far more disturbing than a man's laugh—however contemptuous.

I had felt both Footless and the barkeep stiffen at the remarks. They seemed to be waiting—for more talk, or for me to do something.

I had expected more or less hazing. But this was not friendly hazing, it was a deliberate attempt to insult.

The girlish giggle came again, then stopped as though cut off with a knife. I felt my face flushing. I was mad. Mad and wondering what I could do about it. I didn't have to be told that those three men were killers.

What was the object of it. I wondered. Why pick on me? Did they expect to gain something, or were they simply entirely evil, wishing to fight or kill for the fun of it? I was very conscious of their guns, and of my own gun, hanging like a dead weight down my right leg. And the last thing in the world I could afford to do, I knew, was to make any kind of gunplay.

Footless and the barkeep seemed to still be waiting, waiting for me. I suddenly realized this was not their fight. I would have to fight my own wars. Probably both would see that it was a fair fight, but beyond that they could not go.

Right then, I acquired a complete fatalism that took me through the days to come.

The girlish giggle came again and was choked off as boots and spurs rattled on the boards outside. With immense relief I saw old Idaho's cool gray eyes sweep across us, rest a minute on the three at the end of the bar, dart around the long room, and come back to the barkeep with a glint of amusement.

Idaho spoke to the barkeep. "What's on your mind, Fat?" Then he nodded his head toward me. "Meet Peter Stirling."

The barkeep said, "We're old pardners." We shook hands again.

It seemed to me Idaho raised his voice a little and spoke quite distinctly as though he wanted everybody to hear. He said, "He's working for the Arrowhead now."

I waited for that girlish giggle to come again, but the only sound was Footless pouring out some whisky.

I wondered: Did Idaho really raise his voice, or did I only think so? Was he serving notice that the Arrowhead was backing me up? That, I thought with some bitterness, would help a lot after I was dead.

Idaho drank quickly. He said: "I got that stuff together, Footless. You better load the buckboard before you eat."

Footless said, "Hunh."

The barkeep spoke. "Some of your boys was in here from down-river last night, Idaho."

Idaho said, "I see you don't need new lamps, so I s'pose it was all right."

The barkeep laughed indulgently. "Nothing like that," he said. Then he said, "They said something about some trouble up to the ranch."

"Oh, no!" Idaho told him. "No trouble. Somebody thought Joe was one too many."

The barkeep asked, "You don't know who done it?"

Idaho shrugged. It was very still for a long time as though even the room itself was listening for the answer. At last Idaho said, "I just bought us a new coil of rope."

I sensed that Idaho and the barkeep were talking beyond me, were telling each other and any listeners things I did not grasp. I jumped when Footless slammed his empty glass down on the bar with a bang.

Footless hitched away from the bar, saying, "I'm loadin' now." He told me, "Come on." He stumped away from the door, and I followed him. Idaho said, "See you later, Fat." and came behind us. At the door I listened, wondering if that thin girlish giggle would follow us out, but I heard no sound.

It seemed to me I would never get used to stepping from cool shade out into that blinding sunlight. I asked Idaho, "Who are they?"

Idaho shrugged. "Three of Flack's killers."

"Flack's killers!" I exclaimed.

Idaho shrugged again, as though it was not important. "I'll be over at the Chinaman's," he said.

I glanced back at the Palace, then hurried to catch up with the little dust cloud that followed Footless down the middle of the road.

Footless was mumbling something, and I realized after a while he was talking to me. "Ain't used to a six-shooter, be you?" he asked.

I told him, "I'm good with a rifle."

Footless said, "Hunh." Then he grumbled, "If you ain't good with a six-shooter you better git good. Or not pack one." He went on, "If you have to shoot your way out some time, take your time. Never go after a gun 'lessen you're going to shoot. And take your time. Take your time, and shoot to kill."

As we started up the steps onto the platform in front of the Sacaton Trading Co., he spoke with disgust. "But, hell, they ain't no use trying to tell a young squirt nothing."

While I was helping Footless load bags and boxes on the buckboard I saw the three men come down the road from the Palace Saloon. They walked abreast in the middle of it, kicking up dust, rattling their spurs, with the slim white one in the center. Their eyes swept the buildings, watching corners.

They rode out of the livery barn as I was walking over with a sack of flour on my shoulder. The man on the end nearer to me—the oldest of the three, with a white scar all the way down the side of his face—pulled up his horse and spoke to me. "The Tucson stage leaves at seven tonight. You be on it!"

His words were an order, cold and menacing.

As I stared they rode away, and then I was mad. I yelled after them, "I'm damned if I will!"

They paid no attention. I heard them rattling over the bridge, and I went on into the barn.

Idaho, Footless, and I ate ham, potatoes, bread, butter, coffee, and dried-apple pie at the New York Restaurant.

After eating I helped Footless harness the half-wild team and held their heads while he climbed into the seat and stuck his peg into the can. When I let go, the horses began jumping against their collars, first one, then the other. Then Footless got them in hand and they started off together with a lot of noise and dust. They rumbled over the bridge at a gallop, then realized they had a load to pull and quieted down to a walk.

At the fork in the road Idaho said: "I'm going down-river to where the boys are. You tell Gail I'll be back some time tonight or in the morning." As he turned away he spoke over his shoulder, "Better ride along with Footless going up."

I was disappointed. I had planned on the ride back to the ranch to tell Idaho about Flack offering to help me escape and about the man with the scar ordering me to take the stage to Tucson. I wanted to ask him what it was all about. Then I forgot that in remembering that I had to see Gail to tell her about Idaho. I would have to go to her and tell her. See her.

The dust from the buckboard hung in the air, got in my eyes and nose and lungs. I kicked the horse into a lope and soon caught up. I couldn't ride behind in the dust and I couldn't ride just ahead and leave a cloud of dust for Footless. I tried the sagebrush away from the road but soon became tired of that. Besides, I wanted to get back to the ranch. I kicked the gray again and went on up the long slope toward the Arrowhead.

I noticed there were horse tracks in the road overlying the wagon-wheel tracks. Idaho and I had been ahead of the wagon coming down. Somebody had passed along the road since we came down. I tried to make out how many but couldn't decide. Those three men were always in my mind. Although I had supposed they were going down-river, I didn't really know which way they went. I comforted myself with the reflection that this road led only to the ranch. They

would have no business up there. Probably some of the Arrowhead men, I thought. Or rather—I tried to think that.

I thought this would be a good time to get some six-shooter practice. I found I was reluctant to shoot, to make a great noise that would attract attention. But I could practice drawing. The gray was loping easily, eagerly, willing to go home. I tried over and over again, drawing, cocking, and aiming the heavy black Colt. I realized I was slow and clumsy. The most difficult part seemed to be getting my thumb over the hammer of the single-action gun and making the draw in one smooth motion so that it was cocked by the time it came up. At times I felt silly doing it.

But I kept at it, mile after mile, up and down the long slopes. I looked down at the gun at first, but soon realized that wouldn't do. I had to keep my eyes on the possible target and work the gun instinctively. It would take, I realized with a hopeless feeling, a lot of practice.

I came down a long slope to where the road turned to the left to head an arroyo and wound around through a clump of mesquite. As I turned the corner I had just drawn and cocked the six-shooter. And that was how I had a cocked six-shooter in my hand when I came face to face with Flack's three killers.

The horse stopped instantly, snorted, and pointed his sharp ears forward. The three men were in a row, the white one in the middle, their horses backed a little into the brush. As they were at the turn in the road I was facing them.

Hours and hours, weeks, seemed to pass while there was no movement, no sound. I know, now, that my eyes were popped open, and probably my mouth too. In that hot sunshine I felt icy fingers crawl up and down my back. I was sweating, and afraid the sweat would run down into my eyes and blind me. I was scared.

I saw their hard eyes fastened on me and realized their right hands itched and twitched. I was completely uncon-

scious of the fact that I had a cocked gun in my hand. I began to wonder why they didn't get at it. Why did they sit there and stare at me from cold eyes?

I thought of Footless and the wagon and tried to hear him coming. I thought of Slim and Saturnino and the ranch, miles away. Of my father in New York. And I saw the brooding eyes of Gail Gordon quite clearly.

There was a cold lump in the pit of my stomach. I wondered if it would hurt to die.

In sheer wild fright I yelled out at them, "Get the hell out of here!"

I saw them half raise their hands, cast swift glances at one another, and then come back to me. And then I became conscious of my six-shooter. It was there in my hand, cocked, shoved out ahead of me, covering the white one in the middle. It gave me no comfort.

If I pull the trigger, I thought, I can kill him. And then the other two will kill me.

They made no move but I sensed a restlessness in their bodies. And then, with a wild surge of joy, I heard the rattle and bang of the buckboard coming at a trot down the slope behind me.

I kept my eyes, and the gun, on them and hoped my hand would not shake. I saw a different look in their eyes, a sudden opaqueness as though something was about to happen. "Don't do it," I croaked. "Don't do it!" I was pleading, not threatening—if they but knew it.

I heard a yell from Footless, and the buckboard came to a stop behind me. For another long time there was no sound but the quick breathing of the buckboard team.

I heard Footless mumbling behind me. Mumbling curses over and over as if he had no idea what he was saying. I couldn't stand it much longer. I yelled at them again, "Get the hell out of here!"

I was astonished when, suddenly, the scar-faced one turned

his horse and started. The white one looked after him, then back at me, giggled, and started his horse. I heard Footless whispering to me, "Look out! That Whitey rides off and shoots back over his shoulder!"

The third man shrugged his shoulders and turned to ride after the others. They rode off into the mesquite brush. For a long time I could hear them swishing through the bushes. Then I heard shod horses on rocks and strained my ears until I could hear nothing more. If I had been standing on the ground I would have had to sit down, very quickly.

I turned at last and looked at Footless. He sat there in the buckboard, his six-shooter in his hand, staring at me. He shook his head slowly, and began swearing again, in a whisper, apparently not conscious he was saying anything. He stopped that, and then in a hushed voice said, "My Gawd!"

He stated then, "So you're from New York," blinked, and rubbed a dirty hand over his face. There were channels down his cheeks where the sweat ran down through the caked dust.

He shook his head, as though unable to believe anything any more. He shoved his six-shooter back in the holster and gathered up the reins. Again he whispered, "My Gawd!"

"But look, Footless," I protested, "it was an accident. I was practicing."

It seemed to me Footless was looking at me with vast respect. He nodded and spoke soothingly. "Sure," he said, "sure. It was an accident. You pull a gun on Scarface, on Panhandle, and on Whitey—for practice." He shook his head again, said, "My Gawd!" and yelled at his tired horses.

"But, Footless," I yelled at him before the team tightened the traces, "what will they do?"

Footless looked at me for some time. Then he said, "Do? What'll they do? Them? What'll Scarface and Panhandle and Whitey do?"

He bent forward and jabbed a stubby finger at me. "Listen," he croaked. "Them's the nastiest gun fighters in Arizona

Territory. And you holds 'em up and runs 'em into the brush. Now listen and I'll tell you what they'll do. They can't take that. They can't take that a-tall. They are camped on your trail from now on. They ain't got a thing in the world to do now but hunt you down and kill you."

CHAPTER IV

AFTER THE meeting with those three men and what seemed to me the very curious comment of Footless, I kept close to the wagon. The buckboard team was very tame now. Rivers of sweat ran down their dusty sides, and their bellies were tucked up. Footless drove at a walk up the slopes, then yelled at the team, and with a foot on the brake he sent them at a trot, sometimes a run down the long slopes.

We were coming into the foothills. The groves of short live oaks gave a parklike air to the country. Down to the right the desert no longer swam in the heat waves of midday. Away up ahead the great peaks of the Sacaton Range were turning to gold in the level rays of the setting sun. The band of pines and junipers drawn along the upper slopes of the mountain was dead black.

Going up the westerly slopes our long fantastic shadows ran up the hill ahead. Over the summits we passed into the long black shadows that were creeping out from under the hills.

From the last summit we looked down at the cottonwood grove and the ranch buildings beyond. The green alfalfa

field was in shadow and looked soft and deep like some fabulous carpet.

The girl Gail Gordon, Saturnino, and Slim stood in a group between the main house and the bunkhouse watching us as we came out of the lane under the cottonwoods. The Indian lad Manuel stood back of them. Farther off was a woman I had not seen before. Short, shapeless as a bag of corn, with a broad good-humored face, she stood with her arms crossed. I wondered if she was Indian, related perhaps to Manuel.

I was sorry to see Gail Gordon there. I wanted her to be in the house, so I could go there to tell her about Idaho. (I'll forget about it for the present, I decided. Then later I can go to the house and tell her.)

But when Footless pulled the tired team to a halt the girl spoke first, asking, "Where is Idaho?"

Footless said, "Huh?"

I told her then that Idaho had gone to the river to where the cattle were, and would be home tomorrow. She nodded at that.

Footless made no motion to move on, merely sat there, lifting his foot from the brake to cross his legs. He asked the question of anybody: "You know Scarface?"

Slim nodded. "Yeah."

Footless asked, "And you know Panhandle?"

Slim said, "Sure, I know Panhandle."

Footless went on, "And you know Whitey?"

Slim said: "Hell, yes! I know them. All of them. What about it? Back up and get a new start."

Footless jabbed a thumb over his shoulder at me, "They ordered Pete here to leave the country right pronto."

Footless was enjoying himself. It was evident, he liked to tell things. He waited for a while before exploding, "And damn me if Pete didn't pull a gun on them and run them off into the brush!"

Saturnino took off his big sombrero and yelled, "*Whee*." His white teeth flashed in his delighted laugh.

Slim did not grin. His narrowed eyes searched me. Finally he said, "My, my! Look who's here."

"Tell us," Saturnino exclaimed. "Tell us, Footless."

Footless was only too willing. "Listen," he told them. "There at the turn by the arroyo they held him up, and he flashed his gun on 'em before even Whitey knew the war had begun. Yessir. And he told 'em off plenty and run 'em off into the brush. Like coyotes—yessir, like coyotes. Yessir, the smoothest, fastest draw I ever seen."

I looked at Gail Gordon. Her eyes seemed a still deeper blue. She was looking at me with eager interest.

Saturnino yelled, "*Whee!*" again and slapped Slim on the back. "But what I tell you, Señor Slim?"

I liked it, of course. Who wouldn't? But I couldn't let it go on. "Now look," I told Slim, "it was not that way at all. Damn it, I was just practicing as I rode along. It just happened. It was an accident. When I came around the bend I had just pulled out the gun and cocked it. When I saw them I had the gun already in my hand. And if you want to know," I protested, "I was scared stiff."

Footless said, "Hunh?" in complete disbelief. Saturnino looked skeptical. Only Slim seemed to take my talk seriously. He grinned his slow grin as he said, "You had a right to be scared." He added, "And to keep on being scared."

I looked at Gail Gordon. God knows I wanted her respect and approval, but I didn't want it on any false basis. There was a little smile lurking around the corners of her mouth as she met my eyes. I didn't know what she thought. "It was an accident," I said.

Gail Gordon looked away and spoke to Footless. "Dolores cooked up your supper, Footless. Perhaps the boys would like to eat."

Footless picked up the reins and started the team toward

the cookhouse. Slim called after him, "And, Footless, better see have you got lumber for another coffin."

With vast scorn Footless said, "Hunh."

The girl spoke to the Indian woman, calling her "Dolores," and they moved toward the house. As they went I heard Slim say, "We'll unload." I came to myself and kicked up my horse to ride down to the corrals and unsaddle.

Manuel drove the team down, and I helped him unharness and then back the buckboard under the wagon shed. He did not seem to be able to keep his eyes off me. They were no longer opaque, and I thought I saw interest and friendly approval. Then I told myself I was an ass.

In the bunkhouse that evening Slim had laid out the greasy cards for his game of solitaire. He fiddled with the coal-oil lamp. "Manuel," he said, "if you don't clean this lamp tomorrow I am sure going to skin you alive."

Manuel took his eyes from me to say, "All right."

Slim said, "You'll look right funny running round here with no hide on you."

Manuel smiled. He said, "No good."

I had propped myself up on one of the beds with my hands behind my head. From there I could see one side of Slim's face. Saturnino sat on the other side of the table watching Slim's cards. His huge hat shaded the upper part of his face, but the yellow light from the lamp brought out his long swarthy jaw and straight black mustache.

Slim's hat was shoved back. His lower face was burnt brown by sun and wind. This made his upper forehead seem incredibly white and smooth. His tousled yellow hair stuck out under his hat brim.

Manuel had followed us into the bunkhouse after supper and planted himself on the bed across from me. He sat there staring at me. When I looked at him his eyes would linger for a minute, then slide away. After a while it occurred to me that there was approval, friendliness, in his dark eyes.

I asked Slim, "Did you find out anything about Joe today?"

Slim shook his head. "Nary," he said.

Saturnino said, "But the red queen, Slim."

Slim said, "Go play your own game."

Saturnino told him, "It is more fun to teach you, Slim."

Slim grumbled, "Go teach your grandmother."

Saturnino's white teeth flashed as he laughed. "She was very great lady. She slap my behind many times."

Slim grumbled on, "Doesn't seem to have done you no good." Then he asked, "So Scarface and his little playmates told you to pull your freight?"

"Yes," I told him. "And look, Slim," I added. "When that man Flack was here he offered to help me get away from here."

Slim was watching and dealing his cards, talking as much to himself as to us. "Flack," he said, and played two cards. He went on, "Scarface, Panhandle, and Whitey work for Flack. And Flack wanted to help you get away." He shook his head. "I don't get it."

Slim asked, "You want some advice, Peter?"

I told him, "Of course."

He went on with his cards and talked. "You saddle that other pony, the sorrel, and I'll show you the trail across the hills. You can be in Tucson tomorrow evening and ketch the express east."

"Are you advising me to go?" I asked.

Slim said, "Sure am."

We were all surprised when Manuel suddenly spoke. He said, "No good."

Saturnino asked me, "You go?"

I didn't have to think that over. I told him, "No."

Slim said, "I thought probably you didn't have no sense."

I asked, "But look, Slim, why does Flack hire men like those three?"

Slim shrugged. "Gun-slingers? Well, Flack is always buying and selling stock—cows and horses—buying some place and selling some other place. I ain't saying but what, chasing around all the time the way he does, he needs some tough hombres." He spoke thoughtfully. "Yeah. He really does."

Then Slim asked, "But I don't get it. What's he got on you?"

I said, "I don't know. It seems crazy to me."

Then I thought of something. "But look," I said. "It seemed to worry Flack, come to think of it, because I had been in the Land Office in Tucson. He said he saw me coming out of the Land Office. On the stage coming up to Sacaton City, he led around three times to give me a chance to talk about what I was doing in the Land Office."

Slim asked, "Well, what were you?"

"Nothing," I told him. "I saw the sign 'U.S. Land Office,' and I was interested. It was just curiosity. An old fellow in there told me about taking up homesteads and timber and stone claims and such things."

Slim nodded. "Yeah," he said. "That's what the Arrowhead is. Old J. G., Gail's father, took this place up as a homestead and timber and stone. He proved up long time ago. Controls the water. All the water around here comes from them big springs up the canyon."

"But why should Flack be interested in my fooling around the Land Office?"

Slim shook his head. "I don't git it."

He ran the cards together into a neat pile, got up, stretched, and yawned. "Well, Mister Saturnino Gallego Vacos y Soinato and what the hell, me for the hay. Idaho said you and me ain't got nothing to do but find out what happened to Joe—and why." As he pulled his shirt over his head he mumbled, "Mebbeso Idaho and Fred found out something from the boys down on the river. They ought to be in here by noon."

I felt depressed. I remembered Fred and Garvey. I didn't like them. I wished they would stay away. I asked Slim, "What am I to do tomorrow?"

Slim grinned at me. "You're right good with a shovel." After a minute he added: "But not a grave this time. I'm thinking you won't be in no shape to dig the next grave."

Slim's face was high-lighted by the lamp as he pursed his lips to blow out the light.

I had a lot of things to think about. I wanted to think about Flack, and Joe, and Fred. And why Garvey was so unfriendly. And what happened to Joe and why. And why those three killers were interested. And I wanted to dream about Gail Gordon. Then Flack was sitting on top of a stage in the Land Office while Garvey was spitting tobacco juice onto an alfalfa field and Gail Gordon was beating on a wagon tire with an enormous six-shooter—and then somebody yanked the pillow out from under my head. I sat up and blinked at the dim square of light that was turning into a window.

Slim was pulling his shirt over his head and asking, "You hombres working today or jest resting?"

After breakfast I followed Slim to the corral. He said: "You rode the gray yesterday. You can ride the sorrel today."

"He's skinny," I said.

Slim got his rope off his saddle and climbed through the bars.

I said, "Let me rope him."

Slim answered, "And scare hell out of the whole remuda. Not any."

A dozen saddle ponies thinned out around the corral and started, white-eyed, to circle. Slim stood there with a loop on the ground behind him. Suddenly, without any warning movement the loop seemed to lift from the ground all by itself and slap down over the head of the sorrel. The instant the rope touched the pony he stopped. The rest of the horses stopped too and looked bored.

While I was saddling, Slim roped and saddled his own horse. Then he produced a long-handled shovel. "You'll need this," he said.

We rode down the lane under the cottonwoods and came into the blaze of sunlight at the edge of the alfalfa field. My job, it seemed, was to clean out an irrigation ditch that ran along the farther edge of the field. We got off our horses at the foot of the hill on the other side of the cultivated land. Slim explained to me about cleaning out the ditch. I saw that some work had been done on it and then stopped.

"Yeah," Slim said. "Joe."

He sat down on the hillside and rolled a cigarette. When the smoke was drifting out of his nose he said again: "Yeah. Joe." He seemed to be talking to himself. "Joe was cleaning out the ditch. Then he wanted a smoke. He stuck his shovel in the mud there where you see that slit. Then he went up the slope a little and set himself down. He rolled a cigarette and started to smoke, for the ashes is there. Then he threw the empty tobacco sack down and started for the ranch."

After a while he shook his head, asking, "Then what happened?"

I kept on running the long-handled shovel along the bottom of the ditch and lifting out the sand and dried mud.

Slim got up and slid onto his horse in one long graceful movement. He grinned at me as he rode away. "Keep shoveling, Petey," he said. "Keep shoveling, and you'll make a top hand yet."

Perhaps I would make a top hand some day. But digging graves and ditches had not been my idea of the cattle business. I could dig ditches on Long Island. I had thought only of riding wild horses after wilder cattle over endless plains. Well, I was willing to learn.

There was one thing that warmed my heart though. That was the present attitude of Slim, Saturnino, and Footless. At first their attitude had been amused tolerance, faintly tinged

with contempt. Yesterday they had begun calling me "Pete" and "Petey" almost with affection. And there was the curious attitude of the Indian lad, Manuel, looking at me with youthful admiration. I stopped work to remember in surprise that this was Wednesday forenoon. I had been at the Arrowhead exactly two days.

I heard Footless hammer on the wagon tire. I left the shovel sticking up in the dirt and rode back to the corral. I thought it was silly to saddle a horse to ride from the corral to the ditch. But that, I thought, was the way the cowpuncher's mind worked.

They were at the table in the cook shack. Old Idaho was there, and Fred and Garvey. I was sorry Fred and Garvey had come back.

Idaho grinned at me as I came in. "Well, Bub," he asked, "how's the cow business?"

"Mostly digging," I told him as I slid over the bench beside Saturnino. They thought that was funny.

Fred wore his big black hat at the table. He tipped it back to look at me. "I hear you pulled a gun on Scarface, Panhandle, and Whitey. And made it stick."

He seemed to be glaring at me with dislike. Then he said, "I don't believe it."

I was getting tired of Fred. I told him: "That's all right with me. I don't believe it either."

Idaho chuckled. He said: "Flack apologized for the business. He gave them their time right there."

Fred asked, skeptically, "Did he?"

Idaho said: "Well, you were there. They told him about it. Said they were running a whizzer on a tenderfoot. Flack was all het up. Fired them and gave them their time right then."

Footless said, "Hunh," and slammed a lot of tin dishes into a huge pan.

Saturnino said, "That Whitey."

Footless said: "Slim's faster than Whitey. So's Petey. I seen him, didn't I?"

Saturnino said: "But yes, I think Slim is faster than Whitey. But it is that Whitey likes to kill. Just for the fun of it, to kill."

It looked as if Garvey was about to spit and then realized he had food instead of tobacco in his mouth. He swallowed and spoke with sour interest. "Of course they're fast. I'd sure like to see Slim and Whitey pull guns on each other. It would be something to see."

Good God, I thought, to Garvey it's like a tennis game. He wants to watch expert gunmen kill each other to see which could kill first. Just a game.

Footless said: "Petey's got 'em all beat. I never seen the like."

I thought Garvey really would spit this time.

Idaho asked, "How's the ditch?"

Slim said, "Petey's right good with a shovel." They all laughed. I gathered that none of them liked to dig ditches.

Idaho told me: "Jest keep your shovel hot, Bub. That ditch ain't very long."

I took off my spurs and left them on my bed in the bunk-house. I was going to leave my gun and six-shooter, but thought it would be a good idea to get used to it.

Slim asked, in surprise, "You walking?"

"It's only a couple of hundred yards," I told him.

Slim shook his head sadly. "That ain't no way for a cowman to talk!"

I shoveled along up the ditch in the afternoon and was soon above the cultivated land. The valley narrowed. The hills on either side ran up more steeply. Rocky slopes with the gray sage trying to cover the nakedness of the land.

The little valley seemed to come to a stop ahead of me. Up there was a steep slope that seemed to end things. I wondered where the water came from.

There was a path alongside the ditch. Without thinking about it, I noticed footprints in the path. Down to my left was the stream: about ten yards wide and a foot deep; absolutely pure water. A good place for trout, I thought; but I couldn't see any fish in the clear water. There was a gravelly bottom of many colored stones.

It startled me to find that I was in shadows. The sun had set below the ridge on the other side of the stream. I concluded I had done a day's work of ditch digging, and to hell with the Arrowhead outfit anyway.

I decided to go exploring while waiting for Footless to start his evensong on the old wagon tire. I could see the corrals from where I was. The many buildings were hidden in the cottonwoods. The sun still shone on the tops of the trees.

Ahead of me was the steep slope that ended the valley. Above that the mountains, the Sacaton Range, seemed to climb straight up into the sky. There was a scattering of the squat live oaks, blue-gray in color. Above the oaks was the wide band of juniper trees. Still higher was the black band of the pines dropped across the knees of the great hills. Out of the black band of the pines the bald, cold unfriendly peaks of the Sacaton Range climbed heaven-high, glittering in the level rays of the dying sun. It was, I felt, a bleak, utterly unfriendly land.

I had noticed those footprints in the path, but they did not seem important. Not at first.

Soon I could see where the stream came out from under the hill. Just a big hole in the world, and that gorgeous, life-giving stream of water was born. I came to a rock dam—just a dam of loose rocks that raised the water level a couple of feet. A complicated wooden contrivance was there that let the water into the irrigation ditch where it was wanted. On the other side was a box, and a pipe running out of it. I could follow, with my eyes, the line of pipe as it ran down

toward the ranch. That was how Footless had water in his kitchen sink.

It was a misplaced stone that called my attention to the footprints. Whoever had walked up here had left the dim path at this point and started up the hill. There was one very clear track in the path. I stared at that one footprint for a long time. I stared stupidly, and tried to put a picture out of my mind.

I tried to fight away the picture of the dead Joe, propped up on the bed in the bunkhouse, staring at me from dead eyes. His legs seemed to be a thousand miles long and ended in worn high-heeled boots.

And on the left foot the high heel was run over so that he walked partly on the side of the boot.

And this clear print in the dirt was like that.

There is nothing to that, I told myself. They all run their heels over that way. Besides, Joe wasn't up here. But I could see quite plainly it was a left foot.

I noticed where the rock had been turned over. Just above, another little stone had been shoved aside. It was easy to follow. Then I found a long stone, a couple of feet long and about a foot through. It was lying on a sage bush as though it had been picked up and then thrown aside. I was attracted by what appeared to be markings on the stone.

I was holding it in my hands, turning it over, looking at the markings. At first I thought of old Indian work. But this seemed regular markings, quite precise. I could make out a V on one side and some stripes. There were various vertical stripes on the other sides. None of them the same. It meant nothing to me.

It was while I was holding the stone that I realized it was growing dark. And the intolerable heat of southern Arizona suddenly became chilly. I do not like to think that I suddenly became panic-stricken. But I did have an overpowering sense

of loneliness. I'll take the stone, I thought, and show it to Slim. That was when the shot came.

CHAPTER V

I DO NOT know how I knew, instantly, that I had been shot at. The shot echoed back and forth between the hills, and something twitched at my shirt on the left side. The surprise made me lose my balance.

I dropped the stone, sidestepped, stumbled on a rolling stone, and went on my side, sliding a few feet down the slope. I lay there in sheer panic.

I was afraid even to brush away a twig of sagebrush that was jabbed into my ear. In frozen fright I waited for another shot. After a long time it came to me that it was a very good idea to just lie there. To keep still. Perhaps the man would think I was dead. Perhaps he would think that and not shoot again.

I could see one bright star directly above me. (It won't be long until it is pitch-dark, I thought. When it is black night I can get away.) I strained my ears to hear a man coming cautiously to make sure I was dead. I ought, I thought, to have my gun out and ready, but it seemed safer to make no move at all until it was completely dark. I could hear night birds. I identified, I thought, a whippoorwill, but it didn't sound natural. After listening a long time I knew what the matter was—this desert bird had only two syllables. He said,

"Poor Will, poor Will, poor Will," over and over again in his sad voice.

I wondered about the twitch at my left side. Not daring to move a hand to explore, I imagined dreadful things. I had heard somewhere that to be shot did not hurt at first. I suddenly was quite sure that I felt warm blood running down my left side. Perhaps I was bleeding to death.

Then I clearly heard the sharp noise of a shod horse on stony ground, and a muttered curse. Now he's coming, I thought. I took a chance then and got the six-shooter out of the holster and cocked. Then I heard Slim call: "Hey, Petey!"

I wanted to both laugh and cry as relief engulfed me. I sat up then, carefully uncocked the gun, and shoved it back in the holster. It was half laugh, half sob as I called back, "Hey, Slim!"

Two horsemen were coming up the path beside the ditch. I had heard Slim, and in the faint light left I saw the big hat of Saturnino.

Slim asked: "What the hell? You camping here?"

When I could control my voice, I told him, "I've been shot and killed."

I stumbled down through the sage and came to Saturnino and Slim. They were both sitting in their saddles, their elbows on the saddle horns, idly looking down at me. Curiously indifferent, I thought.

Slim drawled, "You seem right spry for a dead man."

I remembered the quick twitch at my left side and began to explore with my fingers. I found a hole in my shirt. With a finger through the hole I explored my ribs but couldn't find anything there. Rather crestfallen I said, "I guess he didn't hit me."

Slim threw up his head and laughed out loud. Saturnino was more serious. He asked, "But, Petey, you think you were perhaps shot at?"

I said, "I know I was."

Slim asked, "Who?"

I told him I didn't know. Didn't see the man. Didn't even know where he was. Just the slam of the shot, the twitch at my side, and then I stumbled and fell down and stayed there until I heard them coming.

Slim said, "You shouldn't read them 'Deadwood Dick' stories."

Saturnino said: "But the twitch at the side, Slim. Let us look." He slid off his horse, and Slim followed him.

Saturnino got out a block of sulphur matches and started to scratch one. "Don't," I said.

Saturnino looked at me an instant. Slim said: "It's all right. If anybody was here he's gone now. Look at the horses."

The horses were completely indifferent to what was going on. I wanted to ask about that, and then I dodged the acrid stink of sulphur match. The match burned blue and flared in a little yellow flame.

"Here," I said, and pulled my shirt away from the side. In the dim light of the match we all saw two nice clean holes.

Slim said, "Hum," and pushed his lips into the light to blow out the match. He gathered the reins and slid up onto the saddle. "My horse will carry double," he said. "Put a foot in the stirrup and pull yourself up behind me. If the horse jumps, hang on."

I managed to get my leg across before the horse jumped. I hung onto Slim with both arms, and we started down the ditch for the ranch. I forgot all about the shovel.

Garvey was just throwing his saddle up on the corral fence. Slim asked, "That you, Garvey? You jest get back?"

I could hear Garvey spit and grunt. His heavy figure was a black shadow cutting down through the corral poles. So, I was thinking, Garvey was out somewhere during the time I was shot at. I was willing to believe anything of Garvey.

Slim said no more, and we all clumped along to the bunk-

house. A silent shadow came out of the night, and the wordless Manuel was walking beside me. The windows of the bunkhouse were a pale yellow in the darkness. I could hear that curious desert whip'o'will again: "Poor Will. Poor Will." I'm glad, I thought, that my name is not Will.

I asked Slim, "Anybody here named Will?"

Slim asked: "Will? Will? Not as I know of."

To my surprise Garvey said, "My pappie used to call me Will."

I took a vindictive satisfaction in saying, "Listen."

None of them thought of the bird until I spoke of it. Then they noticed the mournful "Poor Will." Saturnino laughed. Garvey stopped and scratched his stomach, peering at me through the darkness. He grunted and stepped up into the bunkhouse.

"Ain't nothing to it," said Slim.

The girl, Gail Gordon, was looking at me across the table. I thought her face lighted with relief when she saw me. I hoped so. The light from the lamp, coming from below, accentuated the faintly aquiline face. Her eyes looked black. She asked, quickly, "Are you all right?" Our eyes held for a time, and I felt my pulse begin to beat.

The front legs of Fred's chair slammed down on the floor as he said, "Hire a ditch digger, and then have to send two top hands to find him."

Slim spoke seriously. "He was shot up there."

Old Idaho had his back to the fireplace, long legs spraddled, one hand pulling at his sweeping white mustache, the other shoved down inside his gun belt. When I had first come in his gray eyes met mine with his usual amused tolerance. Now they suddenly hardened and turned cold.

The girl said, "Shot! Shot?"

I had not noticed Footless. Now he rolled into the lamp light, put two hands on the table, and stared at me. Then he asked, "Did you git him, Petey?"

I wanted, suddenly, to laugh. I loved Footless. He seemed so perfectly certain I was the greatest gun fighter of all time. It was funny.

Fred tipped his head back to look at me from under his hat brim, sourly. "Don't be a fool," he said.

Saturnino pulled my shirt forward from under my left arm. He stuck a long finger through one hole and out the other. He flashed his gay smile at Fred, "You see?"

Fred was skeptical. "Probably dropped cigarette sparks on it."

Footless protested, "Ain't I told you I heard a shot?"

Idaho took command. "Set down and shut up!"

When Idaho spoke in that cold crisp manner people within hearing did as Idaho told them. There were fumbling movements as everybody subsided onto beds and chairs and looked up.

Old Idaho spoke to me. "Go on, Bub, tell it."

I told them about working along the ditch and then going a little way up the slope and finding the stone with the curious markings on it.

Fred broke in. "Hell! Ain't nothing curious about that. That's the old section corner." He glared at me. "What you want to pull up a section for? Ain't you got no sense at all?"

I protested, angrily. "I didn't pull it up. It was up. The stone was lying there on top of the ground."

Fred said, "Humph." I was getting fed up with Mister Fred.

Then I told them what started me up the hill. The track from a boot that had been run over on the side. They got that. Slim and Saturnino looked at each other. Slim said: "Mebbeso Joe did go up there. We'll take a look-see tomorrow."

Idaho asked, "Then what?"

I told him that then I heard a shot and there was a tug at my shirt on the left side, and I fell down and stayed right there.

Idaho smiled, and Garvey spat a long stream into the fireplace. Garvey had an astonishing way of commenting with tobacco juice. I flushed with annoyance.

Idaho asked, "Then what?"

I told him. "Nothing. I stayed there until it was quite dark, and then Slim and Saturnino came."

Idaho asked, "You didn't see anything?"

I shook my head. "I didn't see anybody. I don't even know where the shot came from."

Idaho turned to Garvey. "You were up there working on the pasture fence, Garvey. You see anything?"

Garvey spoke in his surly voice. "Naw. I didn't see nothing." He spat contemptuously and added, "If there'd been anything to see I'd 'a' seen it."

Footless broke in, excitedly. "Didn't you hear the shot I heard? I heard it plain, Garvey. Didn't you hear it?"

Garvey rumbled, "Hell, there weren't no shot."

Fred seemed to think he spoke judicially. "As I see it," he said, "there's something going on here we got to find out about. But it stands to reason it's all tied up with this tenderfoot here. He rides in here and claims he finds Joe dead already. Perhaps he did and perhaps he didn't."

I broke in hotly, "I told you I did, didn't I?"

Fred said, "Humph," and went on. "Now he says he's been shot at. And he did have some kind of trouble with them three men of Flack's. Flack fires them, and now they're sore and probably start thinking up some meanness. The thing to do is to start this tenderfoot down trail and see he keeps going."

Slim put in, "That don't tell us what come to Joe."

Garvey jerked his heavy head toward me. "Mebbe he knows something. Make him talk." His voice was sinister as he added, "They is ways to make people talk."

For the first time the girl spoke, sharply. "Garvey! Stop that!"

Again it came to me with something of a shock that this slim and lovely girl was the owner of the Arrowhead, the boss of these men. I began to think that perhaps she really was the boss.

She spoke to the men. "We aren't getting anywhere. And we are entirely overlooking how it affects Peter Stirling."

She looked at me, thoughtfully, but not at all like a young woman looking at a man. It was merely a problem. "I don't know what it is," she said, "but you may be in some danger here. Something we do not know anything about." After a minute she went on thoughtfully. "Perhaps it would be better, better for you, if you did go. Slim and Saturnino could ride with you and put you on the Tucson stage."

"Am I fired?" I asked her.

She seemed to see me there, me personally. That faint smile struggled at the corners of her mouth. She shook her head. "Oh, no. No. I was thinking of what might be best for you."

I spoke to her directly—trying, I suppose, to reach her personally, reach the young and very lovely woman. "I am not going," I told her, "not until I'm fired."

Saturnino laughed and said, "Whee!"

Fred said: "Humph. If I had my way—"

The girl spoke to Fred. "You won't have your way, Fred." Then she asked, "When will the boys get back?"

Fred said: "They aren't coming back. Me and Garvey are packing grub to the Torso Spring. The boys will come back across the range and meet us there. We're going to comb the brakes for them mossy horns up there. I'm aiming to git them all cleaned out this summer afore we bring in them new bulls." Then he asked, "Why?"

The girl looked up at Idaho. She said, "Perhaps we'd better have all the boys here and clean this matter up."

Idaho tugged at his long white mustache. After a little he spoke slowly: "No. No, I don't see no good in that yet. Them

bulls will be delivered in a month from now, and we got to git them mossy horns out of there." He went on, thinking out loud: "We got to git them cleaned out. May have to shoot some of 'em, they're that wild." He stopped and tugged at his mustache awhile. "I told the boys down on the river last night about what was going on here. Told 'em to pick up any talk in Tucson if they could. They might have something. I'll ride over with Fred and Garvey tomorrow and ask 'em."

He turned to Slim. "Slim, you and Saturnino take Petey and look things over careful tomorrow."

Without a particle of sound the swarthy shapeless woman called Dolores had come to the door and was looking at the girl. The girl nodded. "All right, Dolores," she said. "I'm coming." They went out.

Idaho followed them after a minute. Fred and Garvey pulled off their shirts, pants, and boots and rolled up in their blankets. Slim gathered up the pack of greasy cards, pulled the lamp over, and laid out his game of solitaire. Saturnino sat down across the table. I undressed and got under the blankets, with my hands clasped under my head so that I could watch Slim and Saturnino. Manuel came and sat down on the foot of my bed and continued his embarrassing study of me.

Saturnino brightened up and said, "But the red queen, Slim."

Slim spoke with exasperation: "Listen, Don Saturnino Gallegas Maria Voca y Sonaita and what the hell. Am I playing this game, or ain't I?"

Saturnino said: "But it is the necessity that I watch. To keep you from the cheat."

Slim grumbled: "I ain't never been able to cheat nobody yet. Not even me."

From his blankets Fred groaned, "Shet up and put out the light."

Slim studied a card in his hand and looked over the layout.

He yawned and spoke amicably. "Listen, Fred. You're the range boss, and sometimes I think you are right good at it. When we're out working critters you're boss, and I takes orders. Cheerful. But when we're here at the ranch I takes orders from nobody but Idaho and Gail. Roll that up in a cigarette and blow it out your ears."

Fred grunted and turned over toward the wall.

I was delighted that some one had said something to Fred.

Saturnino pointed to a card with a long urgent finger. Slim glared at him, then shrugged and played the card. He turned to me with his slow grin.

"You know, this Don Saturnino gives me a real pain in the neck. Real bad pain. He drove a herd of saddle ponies out here from California. He sold the buzzard heads and broom tails to the Arrowhead. Now he has a job punching cows. And he owns about a million acres in California with two cows on every acre, and I don't know why he keeps on hanging around the Arrowhead." He played another card and added, "Unless they have sheriffs in California."

Saturnino spoke quietly. "I serve a very great lady."

The room was very quiet after that. I was embarrassed. None of us could have said it. If I had tried to say it I should have felt ashamed, and the others would have laughed.

Coming from Saturnino simply and sincerely, it seemed a beautiful thing to say: "I serve a very great lady."

Then something was going all wrong in my head. That damn' Saturnino! It was a long time before I realized that I was jealous. In a blinding glory I knew that I was in love. In love with Gail Gordon. Gail Gordon of the Arrowhead. And I serve a very great lady. I envied Saturnino for being able to say such things out loud.

Slim said: "Hum. Garvey struck a very bad knot that time. Jest lay a pillow over his face, Petey. That'll start his saw into soft wood."

I had not realized Garvey was asleep and snoring. I was

delighted to reach across and yank the pillow from under his head.

Garvey sat up quickly with a yell of "Hey!" He blinked at the light, cursed, then lay back and turned over mumbling and started to snore again.

Fred, I now realized, was asleep and snoring comfortably. I shall have to learn, I thought, to sleep myself, quickly and soundly, whatever is going on.

The Indian boy, Manuel, broke out in a torrent of Spanish. It had the surprise of an unaccustomed thing. He and Saturnino talked back and forth until Saturnino ended it by saying, "Nada. Nada."

Then he spoke to me, and the boy looked at me hopefully. "Manuel asks you please do not kill Whitey."

I sat up, exclaiming, "Good Lord!"

Saturnino laughed. "Very politely you understand, Don Petey, Manuel asks you do not kill Whitey. He asks you wait, for it is that he wishes to cut the throat of Whitey."

I assured Manuel. "I have no intention of killing Whitey. All I want is to never see him again."

Slim studied a card in his hand, speaking thoughtfully. "And so, Mister Manuel, you want to kill Whitey all you ownself. You are jest a bloodthirsty Injun. I kinda hoped, you being with civilized people like Ma and Sat and Petey, you would git out of them notions. My, my! You talk jest like an Apache."

Manuel protested: "Not Apache. Papago."

Slim played a card and talked to me. "This Manuel here is a Papago. Him and his mother Dolores. There was a time when the Papago owned this whole country round here, and I'm for giving it back to 'em. If they'll take it."

Saturnino pointed to a card.

Slim said, "Lay off," and played the card. He went on talking to me, "Your little playmate Whitey met Manuel's father one day down on the river and killed him."

I sat up again, blurring a horrified, "Why?"

Slim shrugged. "Oh, nothing. It was jest one of them days, you know. Whitey wanted to kill hisself a man that day."

I muttered, "What a country!"

Slim grinned and told me, "You have to git used to it if you're going to live in it."

I said, "Now look—" Then I gave up. I crawled down into the blankets and turned away from the light. I could hear the mournful note of the bird out in the cottonwood grove: "Poor Will. Poor Will."

Then I was in the Land Office in Tucson, and a very great lady was throwing section corners at me while Manuel prowled around with a long knife. I fought madly and sat up to find that Slim had dragged all the blankets off the bed.

Slim complained, "You working here or jest visiting?" It was daylight.

There were pancakes for breakfast, thin and brown. Footless was a very good cook, or I was hungry. Perhaps both.

I supposed it was maple syrup, of course, and tipped the can very carefully. I kept on tipping the heavy can and nothing happened.

Footless said: "That lick ain't very spry this morning, Petey. Turn her loose. Plenty more where that come from."

I tipped the can up, and black molasses began to flow. It was good.

The shapeless Indian woman Dolores, mother of Manuel, passed behind me quite soundless. She picked up a long-handled spoon from one of the pans and smelled of it. Then she picked up the pan and waddled away.

Footless yelled at her, "I ley, you, that's my flapcake batter."

The Indian woman paid no attention at all. Just carried the batter out the end door. I supposed it was going for the breakfast of Gail Gordon. I was annoyed at Footless.

Fred was picking his teeth with the quill from his vest

pocket and grumbling again: "Hey, Footless, fix up a can of sour dough. We'll be camped at the Torso for coupla weeks and I want sour-dough bread. That saleratus bread gives me a pain in the stummick."

Slim was mopping up a lot of molasses with the last of the pancakes. He looked over at Fred with his bland grin: "So that's what ails you, Fred? Your guts. I had a notion it was a broken heart."

Saturnino laughed. Fred said, "You make me sick." Then he spoke to the cook. "And give us all the light bread you got, Footless."

Footless complained, "All right, all right, but that means I gotta bake agin today." After a minute he spoke thoughtfully. "Ain't life hell?"

Outside I asked Slim, "What is light bread?"

Slim asked, "Don't you know nothing a-tall? My, my! Why, light bread is light bread. Made with yeast and baked in the stove. Ain't many cow pokes gets to eat it."

Down by the corrals they were loading three pack horses. Garvey and Fred deftly and quickly throwing packs up on either side of a horse, a rope with a cinch suddenly appeared; a few quick moves, and Garvey was pulling the rope tight. The horse grunted.

Fred said: "Tie 'em up. We'll have to lead 'em till we get away from the ranch."

Garvey tied a loop around the horse's neck. I was surprised and spoke to Slim.

"Why, that's a bowline. Sailors use the same knot."

Slim said, "I wouldn't know about that."

I was suddenly homesick. I thought of the sloop working up along the Maine coast with Father and Sister Jane. I could see the white surf breaking on rocky headlands. And after, I would leave the sloop and go up in the woods after moose with two Indian guides. I laughed.

Slim asked, "What's so funny?"

I told him: "I was thinking of moose. Wondering what a moose would make out of this country."

Then Idaho, Fred, and Garvey were on their horses. Garvey leaned over and took the lead rope of the string of pack horses. Fred asked, "You git that sour dough, Garvey?"

Garvey spat. "Yeah. I got it."

Slim said, "You git yourself a little exercise, Fred, and you'll feel real good."

Fred said, "Humph." with vast contempt and kicked at his horse.

Idaho said, "Watch yourself, Slim." and then waved his hand and called, "Adiós, Gail."

The girl's clear voice came from near the house. "Vaya con Dios." They rode away into the shady tunnel under the cottonwoods.

I asked Saturnino, "What did she say?"

Slim answered, "She said, 'Go with God.'"

CHAPTER VI

SLIM ASKED, "Where's your shovel?"

I had to think. "Why, I left it up there by the ditch."

We were saddling up when I remembered what he said about the knot, and asked: "Where did you come from, Slim? Where were you born?"

Slim grinned. "'Tain't polite in Arizona to ask a man his real name nor where does he come from."

Saturnino spoke gravely. "This Slim, he is not born. He is found under a cow chip in Texas."

The amused voice of Gail Gordon came from behind: "Don Saturnino, why don't you and Slim get your guns and settle the matter? Have it over. You are always insulting each other."

Slim said, "He dassent." Then: "What's on your mind, Gail?"

She told him: "I told Manuel to run in the black mare. I'll take a ride."

He spoke with decision: "You ain't taking no ride. You're sticking right close to the ranch so we know where you are."

She asked, "Am I?"

Slim's face startled me. It was no longer blandly genial. It was bleak and hard as he told her, "You are." But it softened a little as he went on. "Things's being as is, we got to know where everybody is, all the time. Ain't we?"

She nodded thoughtfully: "Yes, of course."

It all surged back into my head again, the dead Joe, the three killers of Flack, and the man taking a shot at me. Suddenly the sun seemed intolerably hot, relentless, and the country hard and desolate.

I brought reluctant eyes to the girl and wondered why I was reluctant. God knew I wanted to look at her. Perhaps I was afraid I should give myself away. I knew I couldn't look at her without showing what I felt.

As I looked at her I wanted to laugh. She had taken exactly the position of old Idaho, her long slim legs spread apart and her hands shoved down inside her belt. She was even teetering a little on the high spurred heels of her incredibly small boots. I said, "If you had a white mustache to tug at you'd ask me, 'What's on your mind, Bub?'"

Saturnino exploded in laughter. "But Petey! It is the true thing. I think we call her Idahocita."

She flushed a little as she laughed, "You keep your name-calling for Slim."

Slim muttered, "Why somebody didn't drown him when he was a kitten—"

I became acutely conscious of her womanhood. She wore a white shirt open at the throat, and I wanted, abruptly, to kiss the hollow at the base of her long white throat.

I came back into the everyday world at the sound of Slim's voice. "I hey, Petey! You reckon that shovel is cooled off so you can handle it?"

Gail Gordon laughed. "That's right, you know. You have to earn your pay."

I laughed with her. "I'm willing." Then I wondered what she meant. I told Slim, "I left the shovel up there."

Slim said: "That was right careless. Never leave tools. Bring 'em in and put 'em away so we can find 'em."

I started to walk, and Slim said, "Hey, none of that." At the corral Slim roped the gray for me and we saddled up. Riding down the lane through the cool tunnel under the great cottonwoods, Slim switched around in his saddle, looking back at the house and muttering to himself, "You reckon she's got sense enough to stick around the ranch?"

Up at the head of the ditch my shovel was still standing upright where I had left it. Slim said, "Show us that track."

We went up the trail beside the flashing stream and I showed them the track just beyond where the stream came out from under the hill. Slim and Saturnino dropped to their knees and peered at the track of the boot with the run-over heel.

They looked up at each other, and Saturnino nodded: "But yes. It is the track of the Joe."

Slim grumbled with disgust: "We was wrong before. It sure got away from us complete. When Joc needed tobacco he went to the bunkhouse and we lost his trail there by the corrals. But after he got his tobacco he done come back and

walked up here." Slim seemed completely disgusted that they had not found that out before.

Slim looked up the slope, and I told him, "That stone is up there."

He nodded to that. "Yeah, one time Idaho pointed out to me there was a section corner up there. Northeast corner of Section 9." He turned to me, "You go on cleaning out the ditch, Petey, and quit stalling around."

I was disappointed. I wanted to stay with Slim and Saturnino. I told myself I wanted to see what they were going to do. Watch them at their work. Learn something. But in the back of my head was a vivid memory that I had been shot at up there the day before.

I climbed back on the gray and sat for a minute watching them. They had both mounted, in a long effortless swing that took them up into the saddle as though wafted up on some gentle breeze. They were eyeing the slope and the crest of the ridge, Slim leaning forward with his elbows on the saddle horn, Saturnino sitting upright.

Slim said, "You take the ridge, Saturnino."

Saturnino nodded and spurred his horse up the hill. The horse walked quickly, its shod feet rattling the rocks as it angled up the slope. Then Saturnino and the horse reached the crest and seemed to ride right into the blazing sun. When I pulled my eyes away they were blackened from the glare.

Slim started up the slope, and I kicked at the gray, looking back over my shoulder at him. He stopped, and his serious, slit-eyed face came around to me. He said, "With Saturnino up there you'll be all right." Then he asked, "You ain't afraid, be you?"

I said, "No, why should I be?" and knew very well that I was afraid. I was desperately afraid.

Slim nodded and started up again, and I went on down the trail with my head hung on my shoulder. Down by the shovel I slid off the gray and dropped the reins. If there was to be

any shooting, I wanted the rifle; and I pulled it out of the scabbard under the left stirrup leather. I had been glad to see that both Slim and Saturnino had their rifles. That was why I had brought mine. Their rifles were like mine, .44-40 Winchesters, only theirs were old and brown while mine was new and shiny black. I had shot a rifle a lot. And I was good at it.

Then I went through a period of dreadful indecision. If there was any shooting I should want the rifle, but I should also want the horse. Perhaps it would be better to leave the rifle on the horse. And I knew perfectly well why I should want the horse. There came to me the memory of a remark my father had made when I was a very little fellow. He had told me then, and I had always remembered, "Running away won't help a bit. You will still have to face it." I turned my back on the horse and propped the rifle against a sage bush. The shovel handle was hot in my hands.

The clear sweet water in the ditch turned a muddy brown when I stuck the shovel in and scooped up a load from the bottom. The mud clung to the shovel, and I struck it sharply on a rock. The flat clang slammed against the opposite hill and came back. Over my shoulder I could see that Slim had stopped and was looking down at me. Then he turned and went away, walking very slowly through the sage, looking intently at the ground. His horse stood headed up the hill, bored head hanging over the dropped reins. Standing that way the shape of the horse seemed reversed. The shoulders looked big and heavy and the hips dwindled to half their size. I scooped up another shovel of mud and banged it on a rock.

I began to hate Slim, for using me as bait: just bait, stuck out there alone in the hot sun for some one to shoot at. I had no doubt they hoped some one would shoot at me. That would make matters simple for them. Then they could find out who it was, and why. Of course they would get him.

They would kill him. And that would do me a lot of good lying there in the hot sun with a .44-.40 slug through me.

Of course, Saturnino up there on the ridge was supposed to be a protection. But how much? My imagination ran wild, and I knew of a dozen men around the head of the little basin all getting ready to shoot at me. I kept looking up at Slim, but he was still walking back and forth, studying the ground. When I raised my eyes to the crest of the ridge to search for Saturnino the sun blinded me.

I lifted out a shovelful of mud and then stopped to search the whole crest around the basin, then look at Slim again, and then get another shovelful of mud. In quick panic I felt as if my rifle was a long way back. I started after it and then thought, resentfully, of the grinning ape Slim and picked up the shovel again. The sun rose higher and hotter.

Slim called and I jumped. He was beckoning me. He said, "Bring the shovel."

I started up with the shovel, then went back to my horse, stuck the rifle in the scabbard, mounted, and rode up to him.

Slim grinned. "Hot, ain't it?" He reached for the shovel and began digging a hole. "We'll put this section corner back where it belongs, so Fred won't have to worry no more."

He went to enlarging and deepening the hole where the cornerstone belonged. I started to sit down and then didn't like to; so I stayed on my feet, beside the horse, handy to the rifle, facing toward the slope and the crest of the hill where Saturnino had gone.

As Slim dug he talked, "There weren't no survey when old J. G., Gail's father, came in here long time back. Him and Idaho. Some years ago he pulled some strings and got a survey run. Then he filed on a homestead and timber claim—the Arrowhead. Gail owns the east half of Section 9. They only proved up last year."

"Proved up?" I asked.

"Yeah," Slim said, "proved up. Got the papers. Got a patent."

"A patent?" I asked.

Slim was a little testy. "Yeah, a patent. Guess mebbeso you call it a deed. The gov'ment bets you you can't stay alive on the place for five years. If you do you gets a patent, and then it's yourn." He went on: "This here's the homestead, a hundred and sixty acres. Right south is the timber and stone claim, another hundred and sixty acres. My, my, don't you know nothing a-tall?"

"Not much," I told him, "but I'm willing to learn."

Slim stuck the stone in the hole and began throwing in rocks. "Git some rocks," he said, "and pile around it."

Clear, and very welcome, came the ringing clang of Footless banging on his wagon tire. Slim lifted the scarf draped around his neck, the knot in back, and wiped the sweat from his face. He looked up the slope and whistled sharply. With the sun overhead I could look at the crest and saw Saturnino appear against the sky. He came down the rocky, brushy slope, sitting loose in the saddle, swaying in unconscious grace to the slipping, sliding half-trot of the horse coming down the steep slope.

Saturnino asked, "Find anything, Slim?"

Slim shook his head. "Nada. He wasn't killed up here."

Saturnino held down a little brass cylinder. It was the empty shell of a .44-40. He flashed his gay smile at me, "You like keep?" he asked me. "The man he shoot at you and leave this."

Slim took the shell, looked it over, and said, "Hell, they all look alike!" He gave it to me and asked Saturnino, "Tracks?"

Saturnino nodded: "Of a horse. One. Shod in front. I not know the tracks, but I remember. He shoot from horse back at Petey and then ride back up in the junipers."

Slim said, "Let's eat."

I was used to riding a horse but not to riding a running horse down a rocky brushy slope, and found I was continually trying to pull up on the reins, tightening the big Spanish bit in the poor gray's mouth. Over his head Slim said, "Turn him loose." I turned him loose and tried to forget the slope. It was good to reach level ground and turn into the trail along the ditch.

On the way from the corrals to the cookhouse Slim said to Saturnino: "I got to git in the office and have a look-see, but I don't want Gail to know nothing about it. After we eats."

Saturnino asked, "You have the something on the mind?"

"I ain't sure. Prob'ly ain't nothing to it."

We spilled cold water over our heads in the cool shade of the porch at the back of the cookhouse. I drank and drank from the olla hanging there. It seemed as if I could not get enough water. Slim said sharply: "Hey! Quit that. You aiming to founder yourself?"

Footless was propped against the sink as usual, with the smoking food piled on the table. "You find anything, Slim?"

Slim said, "Nada."

Footless asked, "You know what I think?"

We were too busy eating to answer. Footless asked again, "You know what I think?"

It seemed only ordinary politeness to say something. No one else did, so I asked, "What?"

Slim gulped the food in his mouth, reached way over, and speared a potato. It broke apart and slid away from his fork. He said, "If you'd cook 'stead of think, these here spuds wouldn't be biled to a fare-ye-well."

Footless said, "Hunh?" Then again. "You know what I think?"

In a despairing voice Slim said, "Oh, Gawd."

Footless said: "Now listen. You know about Joe, don't

you? You know what he used to do in the bunkhouse? You remembers that, don't you?"

"Sure. I remember," Slim said. "I remember all about it. He used to sleep there."

I wished they would not keep harking back to the dead Joe. Whenever he was mentioned I could see the man propped up against the headboard of the bed, staring at me from dead eyes.

Footless paid attention to Slim's remark. He went on: "Now listen. I'll tell you what Joe done in the bunkhouse. He allus took a quilt or two and folded 'em agin the headboard of the bed, and then he leaned agin it and read them Diamond Dick books. Now ain't that what he done?"

I looked at Slim. His forearms were laid on the table, a knife and fork sticking straight up from clenched fists. His eyes were half closed to slits as he stared at Footless. Very slowly he turned his head to meet the wide-open dark eyes of Saturnino. They stared at each other.

Then the dishes jumped as Saturnino slapped the table and yelled. "But yes, Slim! That is the way of it. The bullet go through Joe's head but it does not go through the much cotton in the quilts."

Footless said, "Ain't I told you?"

Slim was talking softly. "Mebbeso, Footless, you got something. Mebbeso Joe comes after tobacco and goes out agin, up the creek. He goes up and looks at that stone. Then he comes back here and fixes hisse'f in the bunkhouse, and somebody steps up to the door and plugs him."

Saturnino spoke urgently. "But of course. That is the way it is."

Slim asked, "But why?"

Footless put in, "He seen something."

Then suddenly Footless yelled: "Now listen. Listen, Slim. Joe goes and takes hisself a look at that section corner, and

then somebody shoots him." Footless' voice was quivering with eagerness. "And now listen, Slim, don't Petey go and take a look at that rock, and then don't somebody take a shot at him too?"

Slim stared intently at nothing, blinked, and shook his head. We all felt let down when he said: "But, hell, it don't make sense! Ever'body knows they is a section corner up there. What the hell? It don't make no sense."

Saturnino shook his head gravely. "But there is the something, Slim."

Slim said: "Yeah, there's something. There's something. There's Joe dead, and Petey with a hole in his pretty new shirt. But it don't make sense."

Saturnino asked: "The papers? The patent? They are perhaps in the office? I think we take a look at them."

Slim began eating, eating hurriedly, morosely. "Sure," he said. "Sure, we'll take a look-see, but there ain't nothing to that."

I didn't want to gulp food like a wolf, but I had to keep up with them. Outside, Slim put two fingers in his mouth, and the hot air was filled with a shrill whistle. I didn't see where he came from, but the Indian lad Manuel was there, looking expectantly at Slim.

Slim broke into a stream of Spanish that I could not follow. He pointed to his forehead and spoke of "José," so I thought he was talking about Joe. I looked a question at Saturnino.

Saturnino said, "He tell Manuel to find the quilt with the blood where Joe was kill."

Manuel's dark, opaque eyes glistened a moment with interest, then he went away down toward the corrals.

Slim said, "Let's go in the office." We walked around the end of the cookhouse, through a covered way to the main ranchhouse. At a door near the back corner of the white-

washed, one-story adobe Slim stopped and spoke softly: "We don't want Gail to know nothing about this. I'm looking for the tally book, and you are jest butting in."

Nodding, Saturnino and I followed Slim into a small room in the corner of the house. The room had a low ceiling. On the white-plastered walls hung a large, rather crudely drawn map and a huge calendar from the Winchester Repeating Arms Company. The picture was of a bull moose standing knee-deep in lily pads with his head on his shoulder looking back at a man in the foreground. The man wore a red and white-checked shirt and was aiming a rifle at the moose. The picture, for an instant, washed Arizona Territory out of my mind. I was again in the Maine woods with two Indian guides paddling silently along still waters through a dark spruce forest. A great surge of homesickness came to me.

Slim whispered, "The tally book."

I came back to Arizona, to dead men and the slam of rifle shots. I looked around the room. There was a gay red and white Navajo blanket on the floor. A roll-top desk with the top up was littered with papers. Two solid-looking chairs had red and white calfskin seats and backs. One window in the thick wall looked down toward the bunkhouse. Opposite the window was a closed door. I stepped over to the map on the wall.

I made out the ruled straight lines of the sections. In heavy pencil the great spring, the stream, and the ditch were laid out. The fences, alfalfa field, houses, sheds, and corrals were all there. At the top of the map it said, "Section 9. T 18 S. R 9 W."

I heard the drawers of the desk slide out and in as Slim hunted for the papers he wanted. I went back to the desk and stood beside Saturnino, looking down over Slim's shoulder. Slim had laid a long narrow book on the desk in front of him. On the corner of the book in ink was the word "Tally." Below that was the figure of an arrowhead, the brand of the outfit.

Slim stopped, and we all listened intently to quick steps the other side of the closed door. The steps went away, and a door slammed.

Slim said, "Oh!" and pulled out a long official-looking envelope.

He took two stiff, folded sheets of parchment from the envelope and flipped one open. I caught the printed heading in the middle of the top, "Department of the Interior, General Land Office," the word "Homestead" and a jumble of land description.

Slim drew in his breath, sharply. "Gawd!" Then: "Somebody is crazy!"

He shoved the sheet up to Saturnino and flipped open the other one. Then he got up and walked over to the map on the wall, shoving his hat forward as he scratched the yellow hair at the back of his head. He came back, and he and Saturnino stared at each other.

Slim asked: "I ain't crazy, be I? You saw that section corner, didn't you? You saw them figures on it, didn't you?"

At each question Saturnino nodded. I asked, "What is it?" but they paid no attention to me.

Slim asked again: "You seen it, didn't you? And it was the northeast corner of Section Nine, warn't it?"

Saturnino nodded. "But, Slim, it is not possible?"

Slim shrugged. "Yeah? Sure it ain't possible. But that's the way it is. Jest one of them things. Some goddam gov'ment clerk makes a little mistake, and a lot of people in Arizona dies and goes to hell for it."

"But what is it?" I begged. "For the Lord's sake what is it?"

Slim looked at me through hard, slitted eyes, his mind far away as he spoke. He nodded his head toward the stiff papers in Saturnino's hands. "Them papers calls for the east half of Section 19. And the Arrowhead is the east half of *Section 9!*"

I still didn't understand just what it was all about, though I had caught the tense excitement. "But what is it?" I urged.

Slim relaxed and shrugged. He took the papers from Saturnino, looked at them again, put them back in the long envelope and shoved them into the drawer.

"Ain't that lovely?" he asked. "Ain't that fine and dandy? The Arrowhead is open gov'ment land!"

"But what do you mean?" I asked.

Slim shoved the long tally book into the drawer and closed it. "Mean?" he muttered. "Mean? Hell, the Arrowhead is open land! Anybody can file on it. Me or Sat or you or anybody can file a homestead on the Arrowhead!"

Suddenly Saturnino's white teeth flashed a low laugh. "But yes," he said. "But try and do it and see what happens to you."

CHAPTER VII

BACK IN the bunkhouse Slim was talking with crisp competence. "We got to git Idaho, and git him quick. Somebody's got to go to Tucson and somebody stay here." He turned his eyes on me appraisingly, as though he had not before taken a good look at me. His amiable grin and lazy drawl were gone.

Finally he said, "We'll have to trust you."

He turned to Saturnino. "You go git Idaho. The boys are camped at the Torso Spring, and you'll find them around there somewhere. Git hold of Idaho and tell him the whole thing. And don't tell nobody else."

Saturnino was gone almost before he had finished speaking. Then Slim turned and looked at me, studying me.

Before he spoke again we heard the drum of running hoofs as Saturnino shot away eastward to find Idaho.

Slim said: "I'd oughta go to Tucson myself, but I got to stay here at the ranch. I guess you won't have no trouble. Now listen—you ride to Sacaton City and ketch the stage for Tucson. It leaves at seven o'clock. You can make it, but you'll have to ride. And you've got to make it. Tomorrow morning in Tucson you go to the Land Office and ask for the plat of Township 18 South, Range 9 West. You take a look at the east half of Section Nine and see what name is on it. That's all you got to do. Jest see what name is on the east half of nine. Then you ketch the stage."

Slim was talking as we hurried down to the corrals. He continued talking, earnestly, while I saddled the gray. "And don't talk to nobody. Don't say nothing to nobody. Jest go to Tucson and git back here quick."

I shoved the rifle into the scabbard and swung up onto the gray. Our own impatience was transmitted to the horse, and he snorted and rose up on his hind legs, anxious to go. When the horse decided the ground was better footing than the air Slim walked beside me.

"I ought to go to Tucson myself," he said, "but I couldn't leave you here to guard the ranch. You wouldn't know what to do."

"What would there be to do?"

"That's just it. That's it. I don't know what. Nothing may happen, or hell may pop in five minutes. We don't know." He looked and acted worried as he repeated, "We don't know nothing."

"Go on," he said, "ride!" Then he added the ominous words, "And don't you let nobody stop you."

Gail Gordon came out of the house and stood by the flaming hollyhocks. "Going somewhere?"

Slim resumed his amiable grin as he answered for me, "Yeah. I got a job for Petey."

I lifted my hat and Gail Gordon laughed. "You are a very polite cowpuncher," she told me. "Perhaps Slim will learn nice manners from you."

"Manners?" Slim asked. "Manners? What's them?"

I left them there, Slim standing with his arms behind him, his hands shoved into his hip pockets, talking amiably with his boss. Apparently, he had not a care in the world.

And I carried with me the picture of Gail Gordon, the mass of black hair and the deep blue eyes standing slim and straight in front of the row of flaming hollyhocks. "I serve a very great lady"—and then I was ashamed of so sentimental a thought.

The leaves on the cottonwoods hung lifeless in the heat. As I rode down through the shady tunnel I could see on each side through the long lanes between the evenly spaced trees. Manuel, I thought, is somewhere in there looking for a bloody blanket.

The sun hit me a blow as I came out from the trees and turned to the right, up the long slope. The road was dug out of the hillside, running in a straight line that slanted upward. On the crest I looked back to the one small gleam of startling white that was the ranchhouse. I set myself for the ride to Sacaton City. There was time, but I had to ride.

The sun was slanting toward the west. The fine white dust rose from the road, and engulfed me, filling my eyes and nose with dust and sweat. Black streaks showed on the shoulders of the horse where the dust-laden sweat ran down.

Across the Rio Sacaton the desert was obscured by the lowering sun. Off to the south the naked mountains of old Mexico cast black shadows eastward. A hot, dusty, naked land, I thought. Primitive, left half finished, a land raw and cruel, a land of sweat and blood that fastened itself on the men who dwelt there.

The horse made thudding noises in the fine white dust. I passed the place where Panhandle, Scarface, and Whitey had

caught me with a gun in my hand, and, Footless said, would never forgive me for it.

I remembered then, and I knew I was afraid. I thought of Flack and his part in the whole business. Flack and his three killers. Idaho had said Flack had paid them off, had fired them. Perhaps he had. Idaho seemed to think so. Or did he?

The ragged, unfriendly mesquite brush that hemmed in the road down on the flats also hemmed in the dust. A road runner got into the road ahead of me, its wings half spread, its long legs twinkling as it ran, effortless, ahead of the running horse.

I came out of the mesquite, and the drab boxes that were Sacaton City were off across the flats to the left. The lowering sun shone into my eyes. I heard the rattle and bang of the stage as it hit the loose planks of the bridge across the dry wash and I stood up in the stirrups to yell and wave my hat.

The stage stopped directly between me and an enormous red sun. The stage was magnified into something grotesque, enormous. A fantastic gray-bearded man with a foot on the brake lever was looking down at me. He said, "So it's you, ain't it?"

I squinted my eyes to look at the same long-haired, gray-bearded man who had driven the stage I came up on from Tucson. I said: "I've got to get to Tucson. Wait until I put up the horse. I'll be right back."

The four fresh stage horses were impatient. The off leader began to raise both front feet from the ground as if getting ready to rear. The driver swore a long string of curses at the horse and then yelled at me: "Turn your horse loose. He'll get to the corral." He fiddled with his teams, then yelled again: "Climb up. Come on!"

I slid off my half-dead horse, tied a knot in the end of the reins and hung them over the saddle horn, pulled the rifle out of the scabbard and slapped the horse on the rump.

Both leaders were dancing now, and the driver yelled, "You going, or ain't you?"

I put a foot on the front wheel hub and started to climb, looking over my shoulder at the saddle horse. The horse had turned away from the stage now. With head down he was slowly plodding along the dusty road toward the bridge and the livery barn beyond. My eyes swept up the street of Sacaton City, and the whole scene stamped itself on my memory.

There was the wide dusty street, the row of drab false-fronted shacks and brown boxes of adobes, the hitch rails with saddle horses dozing, the sunset shadows that reached clear across the street and beyond. And in front of the Sacaton Trading Co., staring across the bridge at me, were those three killers.

Even as I caught sight of them Panhandle, Scarface, and Whitey broke into a lumbering run, toward the row of saddle horses tied at the hitch rail.

The stage driver yelled, and the stage started. My foot came off the hub and I grabbed at the handle of the door. It came open and I jumped, landing on my face on the floor. My feet stuck out and the door banged against them. The four stage horses were on a wild run.

I got my feet inside and climbed up on the front seat, facing backward. I noticed I was the only passenger. Taking hold of the door, I slammed it shut. At the same time I saw the heads of those three killers shoot up above the row of horses. Then the stage turned a corner on two wheels and mesquite trees hid the town.

My right hand hurt, and I saw that the backs of all four fingers of the right hand were skinned. They had been around the rifle when I hit the stage floor face down.

The driver had pulled the horses down now to a fast trot. He was cursing at them and at some "damn' tenderfoot." I expected him to yell down at me, but he didn't. I was about

to say something and then wondered if, perhaps, he did not know that I was aboard.

The stage was an old Concord, hung on great leather straps, thorough braces. It swung from side to side and rocked up and down fore and aft. There were three seats. The middle seat stretched across the stage with my back. The leather cushion at the back of the rear seat had been cut, and coarse brown hair stuck out of it. The stage smelled of leather, dust, hair, and horses.

The sun had set, and the short twilight of the South was already fading into a star-shot night. My bloody, dirty fingers ached.

The road wound around between a wall of the short mesquite and catclaw trees on the first bench about the Sacaton River. Looking back out of the window at the end of the seat, I could see the white dust roll up from the turning wheels and hang in the heavy evening air, filling the little canyon between the short trees. (Those killers, I thought, will be here soon.)

I thought of yelling to the driver, getting him to stop while I climbed up on the front seat with him. Then I could get him to pour the leather into the four horses. But even if he was willing they couldn't run all the way to Tucson. And then they changed horses three times. The stage couldn't outrun three men on horseback. Not for all night. And I had to get to Tucson. I had to.

I switched over to the backless middle seat on the off side, away from the driver. If he does not know I am aboard, I thought, I am glad of it.) I looked out ahead, watching for a sharp turn in the road. I got the door open, holding it. Just before the turn I jumped clear.

As I went out, with my feet shoved out ahead, facing forward and on the run, I heard the door slam shut behind me.

I landed on my feet all right, ran a few steps to get my

balance, and stopped. Then I looked down at my footprints in the dust. (Too dark, I hoped. They won't see them.)

I stepped carefully onto the hard dirt shoulder beside the road and slid quickly into the brush. The hooks of the catclaw pulled at my shirt. I stopped and got my shirt free. As I stood listening, the night seemed to be filled with the drumming of my heart. Then I heard them coming.

Crouched down in the brush I had to keep my mouth open to relieve the drumming in my ears. The swift beat of running feet kept time with my heart. They were coming now.

Through the crooked sticks I could dimly see the white ribbon of the road. The dust from the passing stage still hung there. Before I realized they were there the three killers swept past.

The horses were laid out flat, running hard. The men were leaning forward in the saddles, silent, riding hard. There was something intolerably frightening in the swift passing of those three silent men. In their silence, their ruthlessness, they seemed inhuman, seemed like a wolf pack running hard and silently to the kill.

They will catch the stage, I thought, and when they don't find me they will come. Come back watching the road, looking for signs.

I had to have a horse and the only place to get him was at the livery barn in Sacaton City. I had a sudden wild thought of waiting for the three men in the darkness, holding them up with a gun, setting them afoot and taking their horses. But I dropped that, quickly. I couldn't surprise them, they would be looking for me.

I wanted to get out in the road and run. I had to be in Sacaton City and get out again with a horse before they came back.

Then began a journey that seemed to last for hours, weeks, years. I tried to run in the torturning forest of mesquite and catclaw. My shirt, I soon realized, was beginning to disappear.

My spurs rattled, the stiff crooked sticks seemed to scream as they rasped my chaps. I made no time at all, I would never get there, I would spend all the rest of my life running through that hellish thicket.

A long time I stopped and listened for hoof beats. Then I crept back to the road, ragged, sweating, and breathing hard. That wouldn't do. No use getting into a panic. I took off the chaps and threw them back into the brush. With the rifle in one hand and the spurs in the other I broke into an easy run along the road—and soon realized high-heeled boots were not made for running on foot.

There is something about running away when you think death is riding behind. The more you run, the more you want to. You try to run faster and faster. Fright comes to you, and you look over your shoulder and—

"Damn it to hell," I gulped out loud, "get hold of yourself." I stopped and listened, and my lungs heaved. Then I ran on more slowly, steadily. My feet hurt.

A dim light came out ahead, something far off, obscure, miles away. Then the mesquite brush was gone and the planks of the bridge rattled with a hollow sound. I walked and got my breath. The dim light turned into the yellow glow of a lantern hanging high in the wide door of the livery barn. Up the street were the yellow squares of lighted windows. A dog barked. By the Palace Saloon a man let out a high shrill yell. A man stood under the lantern in the wide door of the livery barn.

The man laughed. A raucous, insulting laugh. "If it ain't the tenderfoot," he guffawed. "The tenderfoot got throwed and had to come in afoot. Haw, haw, haw!"

I was mad and in a hurry. I mimicked him. "Haw, haw, haw." Then I told him, "I've got to have a horse. Quick. I've got to get to Tucson."

"You can't ride that horse to Tucson. He's jest about dead."

I spoke impatiently: "I know that. I want a fresh horse.

The best you've got." I went on, "Slim—" Then I thought Idaho's name would carry more weight. I told him, "Idaho has sent me to Tucson, and I'm in a hurry. Get the horse."

In the dim light from the lantern I could see suspicion growing in his pudgy face. He asked, doubtfully, "You want a horse?"

I was listening while I talked to the man, listening for the pounding beat of running horses coming back to search for me. "Damn you, get me a horse," I yelled at the man.

My impatience seemed to confirm his suspicion. Perhaps if I had taken it easy, had, as Footless would say, "taken my time," the man would have thought nothing of it. I should not have antagonized him.

Now he turned away, saying contemptuously: "You ain't gitting no horse outa this corral. Not tonight."

I thought of my six-shooter and was surprised to find my rifle still in my hand. I cocked it and jabbed the man with the muzzle. I stuck it into his fat belly, hard. I told him, "Get that lantern down!"

The man grunted as I jabbed him with the rifle. He yelled, "Hey."

I told him, "You've got ten seconds."

He peered at me in the gloom, then nodded his head as though he had just remembered something. He mumbled, "So you did hold them up!" Then he spoke hurriedly, "All right. All right. Take it away. That damn thing might go off."

I said, "It'll be just sheer luck if it don't."

He walked over and reached up for the lantern, looking back at me over his shoulder. I was watching him like a cat, wondering if he had a gun on him, if he would duck into the office for a gun, or if he would suddenly run out into the dark and start to yell. Or if he would flatly refuse to do anything. Then what would I do? I didn't know.

He was cursing under his breath as he brought the lantern

and started to walk down the open space between the two rows of stalls. The lantern made a pool of light in which the blue jeans of the man's fat legs seemed to be walking along of themselves as though they were all there was of the man. The moving legs made fantastic shadows. The place smelled of hay and horses. Horses snorted, and the whites of their eyes showed as they looked over their shoulders.

"Wait," I told him. I could see the haunches of a big bay on the left. He seemed fresh, without marks of sweat and dust. He turned the white blaze on his face and looked at me. Instead of snorting he nickered softly.

I told the man, "Get this bay."

He had stopped. Now he looked at the bay and at me and said, "Hey, you can't do that. That's Flack's horse."

"Get it." I started toward him, muttering, "I've not got time to fool with you—"

He spoke quickly. "All right. All right."

He put the lantern on his arm, went in and untied the big bay, and backed him out. Even in that dim light I fell in love with that horse.

"Get my saddle," I told the man.

He led the big bay along to an empty stall, pulled my saddle off the side pole, set the lantern down, and bridled and saddled the horse.

I took the reins in my left hand and told the man, "Get on out front." I followed him to the door that yawned into outer blackness. There I stood and listening for the sound of running horses. Nothing yet. Then that same high gleeful yell came from up by the Palace Saloon.

I dug at the man with my rifle. "Go on out into the road."

He walked out into the middle of the street carrying the lantern with him, watching me over his shoulder. I said, "That's all right," and he stopped. I got a foot in the stirrup and swung up, the rifle still in my hand. The big bay tossed his head up and down, rolling the bit ring over his tongue.

I told the man, "Flack will sell anything. Tell him I'm thinking of buying the horse and want to try him out."

I touched the horse gently with my knee, and he started off at a sedate walk, tossing his head up and down.

The man said, "Flack ain't going to like this."

"And that just about breaks my heart." I felt very much pleased with myself.

Slouched around in the saddle I watched the lantern. I wondered if the man would, after all, produce a gun. I heard the loose planks of the bridge under the big bay's feet. When I turned to the left on the road to Tucson I saw the lantern going rapidly up the street toward the Palace Saloon.

I shoved the rifle down in the scabbard and told the big bay, "And now, Mister Horse, we've got to travel." The big bay fell into an easy mile-devouring lope.

Those three men were somewhere between me and Tucson. And the man at the livery barn carrying his lantern in a hurry up the street would probably start somebody after me from Sacaton City. I wondered if Flack was in Sacaton. I tried to figure out what those three killers would do. Panhandle, Scarface, and Whitey.

They would overtake the stage and, not finding me, would come back. If I dawdled along afraid to meet them, then somebody from Sacaton would overtake me. If I ran away from the Sacaton men I would run into those three. (If I ever see Tucson, I told myself, I'll be just plain lucky.)

I had to reach Tucson as soon as possible, take a look in the Land Office, and get back to the ranch as soon as possible. There was nothing to it but to ride. I wondered about the stage stations. Perhaps I could get a fresh horse at one of them. I gave that up. Those three would be asking about me at the stage stations.

I remembered that Slim had spoken of a trail through the mountains that would take me to Tucson. Wished I knew where it was. Could save time getting back. But to get lost

up there among the peaks of the Sacaton Range would not be any good.

The road dropped down off the first bench into the river bottom and I rode into a damp chill. I remembered my shirt then and began fingering it. It was full of tears, half torn off in fact. I untied my coat from the back of the saddle and shrugged into it. That felt better. The backs of the fingers of my right hand where I had skinned them falling into the stage were stiff with dried blood and ached.

A thin sickle of the new moon hung low in the west, over my left shoulder. I hoped it would bring good luck—I was going to need it. Then I couldn't remember whether one should have the moon over the left or the right shoulder for good luck. The moon, after dropping quite rapidly, now seemed to hang stationary, reluctant to leave this desolate land.

I was, I knew, long past the place where I had left the chaps. I would get them on the way back. And always my ears were strained for the sound of men and horses.

The stage for Sacaton City left Tucson at seven in the morning. The Land Office would not be open then, and I would probably not be there anyway. And perhaps not any other time either.

I was at the first stage station before I knew it. I walked the big bay past the squat adobe and the corrals. A dog barked. The one window in the front of the adobe was a dull yellow square. There was no sign of life about the place except the dog. The dog kept on barking.

Past the station I found I had been holding my breath. The horse fell again into the easy lope, his long stride reaching out and out, easy, effortless. I would certainly buy this horse.

A whippoorwill began calling, and my mind switched to the Arrowhead Ranch and to Gail Gordon. The bird went on with its sad, hopeless call, "Poor Will, poor Will."

The second and third stage stations were dark and lifeless. Even the dogs were asleep. And still no men looking for me. My head ached from the strain of listening and trying to see around corners in the dark. The splendid bay was still going strong. But he had had many rests when I had stopped to listen or crouch down in the saddle and try to catch moving figures against the black horizon.

There were sleepy bird notes in the bushes. Abruptly the east turned white and then faded. It's true, I thought. The false dawn of the desert.

A great streamer of golden light shot away up into the sky. The road came out of the river bottom onto a flat bench. Off to the right, across the flat lands, gleamed the white towers of the old mission. Then I was riding into the miracle of the sunrise.

CHAPTER VIII

I RODE up a gently sloping street between the boxlike adobe houses and flat roofs of the ancient city of Tucson. It looked, I thought, like anything in the world except the United States.

A man was stretching and yawning in a wide gateway. I rode through the gate under the sign, "Tucson Corral—Hay, Feed, and Sales."

"Oats," I told the man.

The man looked surprised. "Ain't got no oats. Corn." Then he said, "This is Flack's horse. He's used to corn."

I tried to be very nonchalant "All right."

I waited, fearfully, for the man to say something more about the horse, but he seemed to think there was nothing surprising in the situation. Probably he took it for granted I was working for Flack. I asked, casually, "Flack around?"

"Yeah. He was around last evening. Probably up to his house."

I was going to ask what time the Land Office opened but thought better of it. The man said, "You can set the rifle in the office."

I said, "No. Leave it on the saddle." I watched where he threw the saddle up on a long pole beside other saddles. He hung the bridle on the saddle horn.

At the gate I looked up and down the dusty street but there was no one in sight. Then there came the rattle of wheels and I saw the stage coming down the street. I got behind the gatepost as the lurching, red-painted Concord coach swept past, the four horses at a swift trot. On the side were curlicue letters, "U.S. Mail—Sacaton City, Tucson." But it was not the same driver.

Walking up the street, really sneaking along close to the buildings, I came to a Chinese restaurant and turned. I was suddenly conscious that I had had no supper and was very hungry. I ate vast quantities of ham and eggs. On the last egg I began to realize that the eggs could have learned something from Caesar's wife.

Outside the restaurant it was hot, and I started to take off my coat. Then I had a good look at my shirt. It was in rags, and there were long scratches and patches of dried blood on my arms and chest. I shrugged the coat back on and buttoned it.

Turning into a wider street, I could see the plaza up ahead. There were frame buildings along here, some bricked over, and on the corner a one-story stone bank. The sight of the bank brought back my father and sister Jane in a quick wave

of homesickness. They were a long way off, in a totally different world to which I might never win back.

Those three killers, I knew, must be here in Tucson. And Flack was here. People were moving about the streets now, and I watched them carefully, my eyes skipping fearfully from one to the other. I should have gone back to that corral and hid in the hay until the Land Office opened.

Across the street I saw the sign, "W. Flack. Buy Anything. Sell Anything." I hurried past, my face turned to the wall on my right. There was no sign of life at Flack's office.

A man was standing in a doorway ahead smoking a pipe. I hated to go past him, to have him look at me. A new sign jutted out from the top of the doorway: "Willard Wallace—Attorney at Law, Notary Public."

I looked across the street as I walked past, but my eyes switched quickly to the man as I heard him say, "Morning, cowpunch."

Then my heart quickened as I heard him ask, "You in trouble, cowpunch?"

I stopped then and looked at him, thankful for the butt of my six-shooter resting against my right wrist. I was looking at one of the chubbiest men I ever saw, about my own age, light-haired, with pink fat cheeks that wrinkled up and half closed his eyes when he grinned. I liked him.

"Trouble?" I asked. "Why should I be in trouble?" And even as I asked my eyes swept the street both ways.

The young fellow gave a deep mocking sigh. He shook his head as he grinned at me. "No reason why you should be. Just my bad luck." He pointed up at the sign with his pipe. "That sign has been there a week, and not a soul has looked at it. Not a soul."

I looked up at the sign. "You're a lawyer?"

He waved grandly with the pipe. "Lawyer? Lawyer? Why, I wrote Kent's Commentaries, Blackstone came to me for ad-

vice, and Gratus—why, Gratus, me and Gratus drank out of the same milk mug.”

“What time does the Land Office open?” I asked him.

“Nine o’clock. And I’ll go right along with you and help you out.”

“Thanks, no,” I told him. “But after I have been there I may want some advice. If I do, I’ll be back.”

Very seriously he asked, “Promise?”

I grinned at him. “Cross my heart and hope to die.”

His eyes crinkled up as he waved his pipe. “I hope,” he said, “that in the next hour you are accused of murder, horse-stealing, and arson.” He scratched a sulphur match on the seat of his shiny blue serge suit as he went on: “But don’t worry. Don’t give it a thought. I’ll get you off.”

I grinned back. “Promise?”

He assured me, soberly, “Cross my heart and hope to die.”

I went up the street, sneaking along the walls, watching the people. I remembered the chubby young lawyer, Willard Wallace, had called me “cowpunch.” I felt pleased at his ready acceptance of my clothes. A little self-consciously, I hitched up my heavy belt and six-shooter. In addition to the gun and cartridges there were a lot of twenty-dollar gold pieces in the belt. The belt, like the high-heeled boots, was not intended to be carried around on foot.

I passed the Land Office and saw movement through a window. I stopped and looked around, making my air as casual as possible. No one seemed to be looking at me, so I walked up the two steps and into the office.

There was a long counter running the length of the room, with a hinged lid at one end now up against the wall. A rack held many inch-thick huge volumes. There were a couple of desks, a safe, and a little sheet-iron stove.

The old man with the hair, mustache, and goatee was hanging a coat on a nail. His eyebrows were straight but had a

curious downward slant outside his eyes. They gave his face a Gothic look, like a church window. He said, "Good morning."

I said, "Good morning. I would like to look at Town 18 South, Range 9 West."

I was, myself, so excited over the matter I felt surprised that he seemed to take the request as perfectly natural.

He said, "18 South, 9 West," ran his finger down the stack, and pulled out one of the huge volumes. He laid it on the counter and went over to the safe, got down on one knee and began fiddling with the dial, counting under his breath.

The wide volume was bound in stiff boards with a canvas cover. I laid the cover back and began turning the big square sheets of townships. They were in Range 9 West. As I turned past township after township, slowly approaching Town 18 South, my heart began to beat faster and faster. I hoped the man would not notice that I was excited.

Before I realized it I was staring down at Township 18 South, Range 9 West. Across the top of the sheet in large square letters stretched the words "Sacaton Mountains." Then I looked at Section 9. Slim was right. The east half of Section 9 was a blank white space.

I looked down to the left to Section 19. In the northeast quarter was written the name J. G. Gordon. There were the letters H. E. and a number. Below that was "Pat." and another number.

The southeast corner of the section, 19, had "J. G. Gordon, T&S" and a number, and below that "Pat." and another number.

So it was all true enough. Gail Gordon owned rocky, desolate, unwatered land off to the southwest of the home place of the Arrowhead. The great spring, the buildings, and the alfalfa patch were open vacant land.

The sweat ran down in my eyes, and I wiped it away. I was nervous, excited, and my hands were moist. I wiped them

and got out the tobacco sack and some crumpled brown papers. I had been rolling cigarettes only a few days, and now my nervous fingers made an even worse job of the cigarette. But I got it going.

When I thought I had control of my voice I spoke casually. "Oh, I'd like to take up a homestead. And a timber and stone claim."

The old man with the face like a church window brightened up and came to the counter talking. "Want to file, do you? Now that's fine. That's just fine. We need settlers here. Need lots of 'em. Young fellows like you to grow up with the country, develop it, and make it civilized."

"It needs that all right," I told him.

He rummaged out some blanks from under the counter, put on a pair of specs, dipped a corroded pen in an ink bottle, peered at me over the glasses, and asked, "Now which is it?"

I told him, "I want to file a homestead on the northeast corner of Section 9, Town 18 South, Range 9 West."

His pen spluttered and scratched, and his old face had the intentness of a child as he wrote. After a while he said, "There you are, that's fine. Sign here."

I took up the pen, asking, "Can I sign for some one else?"

He smiled genially as though a whole lot of foolish questions went across that counter. "Nope," he said. "Person filing has to sign."

I signed. Then I told him. "And a timber and stone claim on the southeast corner of the same section."

"That's fine," he said, "that's fine," and rummaged out a different form and scratched away at it. Then he said, "Sign here." I signed.

He got out more forms and made copies. Then he marked my name and the numbers in the big book. I stared down at the name "Peter Stirling" and the numbers of the H.E. and the T&S. I read the forms through very carefully and looked at the map. There was, I was sure, no mistake now. I took

off my gun belt, folded up my copy, squeezed open the double leather of the belt, and got out some gold pieces. Then I tucked my copy down in the belt.

The old man told me what the filing fees were and I paid him. He went to the safe for change as he told me: "I'm the Recorder. The Receiver ain't down yet, but I can give you a receipt." I stuck the receipt in my pocket.

"Well, thanks," I said.

He smiled quite happily. "Thank you," he said. "Ain't many fees coming in here in this desert country."

As I started for the door he said: "Now about you signing for some other person. Like I told you, you can't do that. But you can make out a relinquishment."

"Relinquishment?" I asked.

He said: "Yes. You make it out if you give up and want to sell your improvements. It don't give the other person the filing, it jist shows us you are giving up the place, abandoning it, and then any one can file on it. Course, way they do it, they keep the matter quiet and the man brings the relinquishment in here and we let him file just as though it was vacant land."

I said, "I see. Glad you told me." I stepped down into the hot sun, thinking: "That's it. I'll see that lawyer and relinquish to Gail Gordon." I felt fine.

The chubby young lawyer, Willard Wallace, was still standing in the doorway of his office. "You know anything about land laws?" I asked him.

His eyes crinkled nearly shut, he waved his pipe grandly as he assured me, "My boy, I invented them."

"Then let's do some business," I suggested.

Abruptly I became careful, suspicious. "You make a business of keeping your stuff secret, don't you?"

He sobered at that. He insisted, "Of course."

I told him, "You better had for your own good in this case: It might be bad luck if people thought you knew too much."

His boyish face took on a curious hardness that I had not expected to see. He said, "Leave it to me."

I gave him the data, that I wanted to make out a relinquishment of a homestead and timber and stone claims to Gail Gordon. I watched him when I said "Gail Gordon," but the name apparently meant nothing to him.

I signed the papers and then swore to them and he affixed the notary stamp.

"How much do I owe you?" I asked as I got up from the table.

His fat cheeks ran up into his eyes as he grinned up at me. "Seeing that you are my first client, I wouldn't charge anything if it were not for the unfortunate fact that I long ago acquired the habit of eating." He spoke hopefully. "Would a dollar be too much?"

I dragged two silver dollars out of the pocket of my jeans. "Make it two," I told him.

As his face fell in denial I said: "The other one is a retainer: I may need you again soon." Which shows I was a better prophet than I knew.

We shook hands cordially. "Now don't forget," he grinned. "I'm the best damn lawyer in the Territory of Arizona."

"I won't," I told him, went out, and took a swift look up and down the street. As I passed hurriedly along, my spurs rattling on the dried mud of the sidewalk, I saw a sign that said, "Tom Morgan. Sheriff." Just as I passed, a tall, gray-haired man came to the door. He reminded me of Idaho. He was wearing spectacles and looked down over them at me. It was a very benignant look. "A nice sheriff," I thought.

I went in the Chinese restaurant and got two ham sandwiches and put them in my coat pocket. The sun seemed to burn my back as I went on down to the corral, but I couldn't take my coat off yet and show my torn shirt and dried blood.

I was worried about what would happen at the corral. Flack might have been there and seen the horse. Or those

three, Panhandle, Scarface, or Whitey, might have drifted in. I wondered if they knew I had that big bay horse. But if they did not go back to Sacaton last night they couldn't know. And I felt sure they were in Tucson. I went into the corral very cautiously.

There was no one about. I walked down the long line of stalls looking at the horses. I would need, I thought, a fresh horse. But the big bay turned his white face to look at me and nicker softly.

I went into the stall and looked him over. He seemed all right in spite of the long ride. I ought, it seemed to me, to return the horse to Sacaton City. And besides, I wanted him.

There was no one in the one-room adobe office. I dropped the reins on the ground, went in, and sat down at a roll-top desk and wrote a note to Flack. Told him I wanted to buy the horse. He could send me a bill at the Arrowhead. I would pay whatever he wished. I sealed the envelope, addressed it, and laid a twenty-five-cent piece on it.

When I slid up into the saddle the big bay tossed his head, rolled the bit ring, and stepped out vigorously. He seemed quite willing to travel. I rode out the gate and turned left, headed down the gently sloping street for the long ride to Sacaton City and the Arrowhead.

Then I saw Flack.

Flack came out of a side street and turned the corner, stepping briskly. His stocky figure was dressed in a neat gray suit. He wore a soft white shirt. His neckless flat head seemed to rest directly on the heavy shoulders. When he came around the corner his eyes flicked to the man on horseback in the street. I could see sudden interest come to the eyes. The eyes flicked up to me and stayed wide open. His mouth hung open.

I started to pull up the big bay, intending to tell him I wanted to buy the horse.

Then he went into action, letting out a great bellow,

"Horse thief! Horse thief!" I saw him groping inside his coat under his left armpit. I sensed that men were appearing at doorways. Up the side street, out of the tail of my eye, I saw a man start to run toward me, pulling out a six-shooter.

From somewhere back of me I heard another voice yell, "Horse thief!" I touched the big bay with the spur, and he jumped.

Flack had got his gun out now. He was still yelling, yelling: "Stop him! Stop him! Knock him off his horse! Kill that man! Kill him!"

Then his six-shooter bucked in his hand and the noise slammed along the fronts of the adobe houses. Somebody else started to shoot from behind me, and I dug the spurs in. I ducked down over the horse and rode.

A bullet hit a mud wall and shrieked away. I saw the dust kick up in the road ahead of me. I looked back along my side and saw a man run out into the road, kneel down, and lay his six-shooter very carefully over his left forearm. (Hé, I thought, will get me!)

I could see two more men running, and shooting as they ran. A great rage engulfed me. It was not their business. I had done nothing to them. I sank into a depth of bitterness. I was appalled at the way men would jump into a man hunt that in no way concerned them. That is, if they thought it was safe for them.

I wanted to kill. I wanted those men who were shooting at me without reason. I cursed them, and started to pull up the big bay and reached down for the rifle, talking out loud. "Damn you," I was telling them, "I'll make it damn unsafe for you!"

Then, as if a door had closed, the shooting stopped. I looked around and let the horse go. Out beyond the horse the road had turned to the right and was out of line from the street.

The great bay was running steadily, his splendid shoulders

working easily as he reached out and out. Over my shoulder I watched where the street opened onto the flat lands, but no one appeared. (They will get horses, I thought.)

I let the horse run on across the open flat land. Off to the left the white towers of the old mission gleamed in the sun. Away up and beyond, the jagged peaks of the mountains climbed the sky. Down beyond those peaks was the Arrowhead, and Gail Gordon. I wished I knew the trail that cut off so many miles between Tucson and the ranch.

Where the road left the low bench to dip down into the dwarf forest of mesquite and catclaw in the river bottom I pulled the horse up and let him breathe. I watched the road behind me, but no one had come out from among the houses. I think that made me more uneasy than if I could have seen men on my trail. If there had been men in sight it would have been a visible, concrete fact to deal with. Now it was a matter of imagination as to what was going on, and there was no limit to the danger.

As the short mesquite trees closed in around me I felt relief as at a place in which to hide. Then I wished it was flat open country so I could see what was going on. I felt a quick surge of longing for the safety of the Arrowhead, for Slim and Saturnino, for old Idaho and Footless. I should even have welcomed Fred and Garvey. Garvey, with his reddish stubble in patches on his face and long streams of tobacco juice.

Again I rode with my face on my shoulder and ears straining to pick up the fast beat of running horses. I let the big bay take it easy, saving him for some quick burst of speed.

At the first stage station a small black dog ran out and barked furiously, then suddenly lay down in the dust and lolled out a red panting tongue. He seemed to regret his former activity. The road wound around through the mesquite and catclaw. I must, I thought, remember to find my chaps.

When the sun was overhead I ate one of the ham sand-

wiches and put the rest back in the coat pocket. At the second stage station a Mexican was against the wall of the adobe smoking a brown paper cigarette. He looked like Fred with his head tipped back to look at me from under his hat brim. But the Mexican showed no interest in me.

It was late afternoon when I passed the third stage station. A man with hands on his hips stood in a corral gate watching me as I rode past. He simply stood there and watched. I looked back from the turn in the road and saw him walking idly toward the boxlike adobe house. He did not seem to be interested in me.

Before I realized it the sun was away down in the west. It sank into the dust haze of the desert, grew to enormous size, turned blood-red and hung there.

Later, in the gathering dusk I saw the new moon again, looking like a strip of lemon peel. (This time, I thought, it is over my right shoulder, so it must be all right either way.) Then I heard the rattle of the stage coming down from Sacaton City, and I walked the horse out of sight into the brush.

The stage was coming swiftly, all four horses at a stiff trot. It swept past and was gone into the night. As it went past my horse nickered softly. I wondered if any one on the stage heard him, and what they would think of it. (I've learned something, I thought. Horses nicker to each other.)

Three times, in the darkness, I got off and hunted for the chaps, but I didn't find the right place, or some one else had found them.

It was with enormous relief that I saw the lantern hanging in the wood doorway of the livery barn in Sacaton City. The boards of the bridge rattled as the big bay walked across.

Dull yellow windows came out of the darkness, and I heard men walking on loose boardwalks and spurs rattling. I wanted to go up there, to have lights and company and a drink of whisky.

There was no one in the barn. I unsaddled the big bay, watered him, pulled hay down, and fed him corn. I located the horse I had ridden down from the Arrowhead. It seemed years and years ago. I argued with myself about going up-town and decided not to. I would sleep a couple of hours and then be at the ranch soon after daylight. I took the rifle and climbed a ladder into the loft, ate the last of the sandwiches, curled up in the warm hay, and went to sleep—went to sleep to ride a great bay horse into a blood-red sun.

CHAPTER IX

WHEN I WOKE up a long yellow bar extended clear across the barn. I watched it, idly, for a while and then recognized that it was sunlight—sunlight shining through a knothole and making a long bar of yellow light through the dust. I got to my feet and began picking hay off my clothes. I had intended to be gone before daylight.

I heard a man down below say, "Stand over," and then the noise of a shovel scraping on the floor of a stall. A wheelbarrow creaked out the back door and came back again. I buckled on my gun belt, picked up the rifle, and looked down the square hole.

The stableman was leaning on a long-handled shovel staring up at me, his eyes and mouth wide open. He said, "I'll be damned."

As I scrambled down the ladder he went on talking, "You

oughtn't to 'a' rubbed me the wrong way the other night." He spoke defensively.

I said, "That's all right. Don't think of it."

He said, "Sorry I was hostile, but I didn't know."

"Forget it," I told him.

He said, "Saturnino came in last night looking for you."

I brightened up. "Saturnino? Where is he?"

He said, "Uptown some'eres—at the Palace probably."

I felt good. It was an enormous relief to know that Saturnino was there. It seemed as if all my troubles were over. I went out back to the water trough, pulled off my ragged shirt and undershirt, and washed. There were a lot of deep scratches and dried blood, and the fingers on my right hand smarted when I washed them. But with a wash, and Saturnino near, it was a new world. A new and very pleasant world.

I threw my shirt and undershirt into the manure pile and pulled on my coat. Going out through the barn I shoved the rifle into the saddle scabbard and left it there. In the blistering sunlight of midforenoon I walked the dusty road to the Sacaton Trading Co. The long, shady room was a jumble of shelves, counters, boxes, and barrels. Tin dishes, pails, and lanterns hung from the ceiling. It smelled of coffee, brown sugar, and leather. I pulled on a new undershirt and shirt, and carried my coat over my shoulder.

The young fellow in there seemed to know all about me. He said, "Saturnino is looking for you."

I told him, "I am hunting him up right now."

He followed me to the screen door. Just before I went out he spoke softly, "Panhandle is in town!"

With one hand on the door latch I stopped and looked at the clerk. I was scared, and afraid I would croak if I spoke. I nodded my head to him.

He said: "He's alone. I don't know where are Scarface and Whitey."

When he said, "He's alone," his eyes gleamed, and there was a hopeful note in his voice. He was saying to me as plainly as if he had said it out loud, "You got him alone and can kill him easy." That was what he meant and I knew it. I was appalled.

Afraid to trust my voice I mumbled, "Hum."

And I hated to open that screen door. I was afraid to go out into the sunlight. That jumbled store was a haven of peace I wished never to leave. The outdoors became filled with Panhandles—Panhandles with bloodshot eyes and cruel mouths lurking around every corner.

I pushed the screen door open and stepped out to blink against the white glare. Up the street the only life was a slim saddled horse tied to the hitch rail in front of the restaurant. Was that his horse? And where could I find Saturnino?

The young clerk had his face pressed against the screen door. He whispered, "Good luck."

I went back into the livery barn and tied my coat on the back of the saddle. "I won't need that today," I thought. "Probably never need it again."

The stableman came ambling along, "See Saturnino?" he asked.

I said, "Just going to look for him," and wished I hadn't said it. I didn't want to go uptown. I wanted to saddle a horse and get out of town as quickly as possible.

"What time is it?" I asked.

The stableman pulled out a huge silver hunting-case watch, looked at it proudly, snapped it shut, and said, "Eleven o'clock."

I was thinking that I couldn't hide in the barn forever. People would learn I was hiding in the barn. I think a lot of courage is merely the fear of being thought afraid. I walked out front, looked up the empty street, and dragged my rattling spurs through the dust toward the Palace Saloon.

I suddenly felt very hungry and realized I had had no

breakfast. I wanted to go into the restaurant but I wanted more to find Saturnino. I remembered my father, in telling of his Civil War days, had one time mentioned that if one was shot in the guts it was better to have them empty. At that thought they really did feel empty.

I was sweating. I wiped the palms of my hands on my blue jeans. I watched the empty windows and the corners of the buildings and felt surprise and relief when I stepped up onto the boardwalk in front of the Palace Saloon. I got inside as quickly as possible without actually running. And felt my heart sink as my eyes widened to the gloom of the long room.

The gaming tables on the right were all covered now with pieces of black oilcloth. The scuffed-up board floor, the large kerosene lamps hanging under huge fly-specked tin reflectors, the round, green-covered poker tables in the far corner, the bar on the left with the mirror behind it, the fat barkeep polishing a glass and smiling amiably, all were familiar and just as when I had been in there with Footless. But no Saturnino.

I had felt certain Saturnino would be there, and his white teeth flashing in his gay smile would assure me that I had a friend at hand. And I desperately wanted a friend just then.

The fat barkeep put the glass down, pulled at his huge mustache that reminded me of the handlebars of a bicycle and asked, "Seen Saturnino? He's looking for you."

"I'm looking for him too." I walked over to the bar and hung a high heel against the footrail. "So that's what these high heels are for?" I asked. "So your feet won't slide over the rail."

The fat barkeep laughed. Setting a whisky glass on the bar, he reached under for a bottle and gave it a push so that it slid several feet and came to rest close to my hand. "Very clever," I told him.

I was afraid my hand would tremble in pouring the whisky, but it didn't. I gulped the drink, and shivered.

The fat barkeep came and eaned hairy forearms on the bar. He said, "Panhandle's in town."

I nodded to that. "I heard so."

I was acutely conscious of a horse and the creak of saddle leather out front, but the horse went on down the road. I brought myself to listen to what Fat was saying, and was surprised to find that he seemed to be rambling along about nothing in particular.

"Old J. G.," he was saying, "set me up here."

"J. G. Gordon?" I asked.

"Yeah. Gail's father. It was pretty tough outfit run this place then. Old J. G. wanted a place here where the Arrowhead boys could get decent whisky and buck a straight game when they came to town. The old tough hombre outfit sold rotgut and ran crooked games, and there was fighting and shooting all the time. So old J. G. bought 'em out and put me in here. I paid my half in two-three years."

I blurted out, "Do you mean Gail Gordon owns half the Palace Saloon?"

He grinned at me, seeming to understand my astonishment. "Yeah," he said. "She says she owns the upper half, from the middle of the walls up."

He brought up a rag and began mopping the clean, shining bar. "So you see," he said, "like all cow outfits, us Arrowheads kinda stick together."

I began to sense that he was telling me something, something that concerned me personally, but that his code did not permit him to say outright. What he said next made me sure of it:

"Now this Panhandle. He's pretty smooth with a six-shooter. A killer. He's around here somewhere making medicine and working himself up plumb hostile."

Icy fingers ran up and down my back as I started to ask a question, then turned toward the swinging doors at the rattle of spurs. The doors were booted open, and a man stood facing

me with his back to the glaring sunlight. It was Panhandle.

His feet were a little apart, his cruel face stuck forward. His arms hung down, slightly bent at the elbows, the right hand close to the black butt of his six-shooter. It seemed to me that his fingers twitched like the tail of a hunting cat.

I saw his eyes slide swiftly around the room and come back to me. All movement, all sound seemed frozen into a great stillness. The icy fingers crawled up my back again. The sweat came out in my hands and I shivered.

The barkeep spoke casually. "Morning, Panhandle."

Panhandle paid no attention to Fat. With his eyes fastened on me he came along the bar, passed behind me, and my back shrank. I shifted my eyes to watch him in the mirror. He came up to the bar beyond me and growled. "Whisky."

Fat put a glass on the bar and slid the bottle along. Panhandle poured a full glass and gulped it. Then he gulped another. He slammed a fifty-cent piece down on the bar, stepped back a pace, and faced me.

Curiously, I remembered a fencing master I had once had, a stocky Frenchman who kept begging me, "Watch his eyes, watch his eyes."

I watched Panhandle's eyes and was afraid. They were gray, bloodshot, glaring. They were inhuman, the eyes of a wild beast.

His head stuck forward like that of a striking snake. He flung at me, "I told you to git out of the country!"

Fat spoke reprovingly. "Now, now, Panhandle."

Panhandle's eyes still bored into mine. "He's got a gun, ain't he?"

Fat still had reproof in his voice. "Not in here, Panhandle. Not in here. There's the rules."

Panhandle gave a snort of contempt. Then his thin, cruel lips twisted open to tell me, "When you come out of here—come shooting!"

Fat spoke quietly, "And I'll be with him, Panhandle, jest in case—"

Panhandle snarled, "Jest in case what?"

Fat's voice was still quiet, even, as he answered, "Jest in case there should be any shooting in the back—like last time."

Panhandle snarled and let out a string of filthy oaths that ended up with the conviction that Fat was a dirty liar. Fat said nothing.

Panhandle went out the door without looking back. My hand was shaking as I reached for the whisky bottle.

Fat spoke judicially, "Well, perhaps a little."

The whisky gave no lift to my spirits. It seemed indeed to drown me in a sea of bitterness. I didn't want to die. How had I got myself in such a place? I thought of sneaking out the back door. I saw myself sneaking along the back yards, ducking into the livery barn, getting a horse, and riding at a wild run away out of this horrible country.

My thoughts came back from a vast distance to see Fat come around the end of the bar with a ten-gauge double-barrel shotgun in his hands, the barrels only about a foot long, such as express messengers carry: a "sawed-off" shotgun.

Fat gave his fat chuckle as he patted the shotgun. "This," he said, "is the law in Sacaton."

"What are you going to do?" I gulped.

He was quite amiable. "The last man they killed," he told me, "Panhandle held him in talk, and Whitey shot him in the back. I aim to see there ain't nothing like that now." He chuckled again.

I wanted to curse him out loud. He could chuckle and pat his gun and amble around. He wasn't going out to be killed. He said, "I'll go out first."

I said, "All right."

The swing doors flicked open and shut. I didn't want to go out there. Ice-cold drops of sweat ran down my belly. I wiped my wet hands on the rough blue jeans.

My eyes fought the glare of sunlight and fastened on Panhandle. He was standing at the corner of the restaurant, diagonally across the street.

I had not consciously looked anywhere but at Panhandle, yet I had a complete picture of Sacaton City, a picture I shall carry always. Panhandle was across the street, his arms hanging down his side. Down in the street to the right Fat had his shotgun in the crook of his arm, his side turned to Panhandle. He seemed to be watching windows and corners off to my right.

Straight along the ragged board sidewalk on my side of the street I saw Saturnino. He stood there with long legs spread, a six-shooter in his hand. He turned his head for an instant, and I saw his white teeth flash in a gay smile; then he went on watching down the street.

I was conscious of men at doors and the street corners, peering at us. Two men came out of the livery barn and stopped to look up the street. Suddenly they ducked back into the barn and their heads came around the edge of the door, one above the other. From somewhere down the street a loud voice said something about Panhandle.

I didn't know whether Fat was talking or it was some far-off memory that rang in my ears: "Take your time. Take your time." A great bitterness welled up, and I thought of myself as already dead. Completely mad, I yelled at Panhandle and cursed him, and stepped down into the road and walked toward him.

I cursed him again and yelled at him, "You don't dare pull your gun!"

There was nothing in the world but Panhandle's glaring bloodshot eyes. They grew to enormous size and became pin points of lust to kill, the eyes of a wild beast about to spring. I saw the eyes flicker and knew there was a flash of movement at his side and my six-shooter bucked and roared.

Then for ages there was no sound and no movement in

all the world. The black shadow under Panhandle's feet wavered, and Panhandle stepped backward as though he had to keep his feet in the shadow. A little puff of dust came up when his six-shooter landed on the ground. His knees buckled, and then he pitched forward on his face. He was dead before he hit the ground.

The next thing I knew, an excited and yelling Saturnino was hammering on my back with his six-shooter. "Hey!" I yelled at him. "That hurts."

With astonished eyes Saturnino looked at the cocked six-shooter in his hand. He let out a great roar of laughter, let the hammer down, and stuck the gun in its holster. Then he pounded me on the back with his bare hand.

I was conscious of men coming around corners and out of buildings. Women looked out of doors, shading their eyes with their hands. I had not dreamed there were so many people in Sacaton. There was a ring of men around me, another ring around the dead body that had been Panhandle.

I heard a man say, "Plumb center." Another said, "Yeah, too dead to stink."

Fat was chuckling and pumping my hand. "That," he announced, "was the coolest thing I ever see a man do."

The crowd was pressing up to look at me, grinning and laughing and gabbling. They seemed pleased and proud to know me. I kept my eyes away from the dead Panhandle.

Fat said, "Gentlemen, the drinks is on the house."

I mumbled to Saturnino, "For God's sake, get me out of here!"

Saturnino's dark eyes showed instant concern. He put his arm around my shoulders. It felt good. I think I wanted to cry. He whispered, "Did he get you?"

I asked him, "Did he shoot?"

Saturnino stared at me an instant. Then he laughed. "But yes," he said, "he shot the two times."

I told him: "I didn't even hear it. He missed me completely."

Saturnino said: "It was the way you did. You had him what they called the buffalo. Walking at him that way and talking at him as though you had not the worry in the world."

"You are a damn fool. It was because I was scared sick."

Saturnino laughed and hugged me again. He asked, "Did you have the eat?"

"No breakfast," I told him, "and I don't want any." I confessed, "I couldn't keep it down."

Saturnino was all concern. "Of course, it makes one sick at the stomach. I know myself. But that is the way it is. We will ride to the Arrowhead and fill the good Footless with joy. We will say to him we must ride quickly to the ranch without breakfast to have his good cooking."

I had the notion that Saturnino was trying to coax a grin to my face. As we walked down to the livery barn he said: "Do not give it the thought, Petey. That is the way it is."

I said, "You know now why that Joe was killed."

He nodded: "But yes. It is so. That Joe had learned too much about the section corner. And that is why they take the shoot at you. But we do not know who killed the Joe person." Then he asked me, "What is it you find out in Tucson?"

"It's all right," I told him. "I fixed it up."

Saturnino was not curious about it. "I am glad. That is fine."

I said, "I was looking for you this morning."

He laughed. "And me. I see you make the look. But me, I am look for Panhandle. I camp myself on Mister Panhandle trail so he does not do the bad work. The shoot in the back."

"Thanks, Saturnino." I wished I could put my arms around him and hug him as he had me.

The man was gone from the livery barn. "He hear all this

long way," Saturnino said, "when Fat say that the drinks are on the roof."

The big bay turned his head along his shoulders and nickered. I showed him to Saturnino and said I was going to buy him.

He seemed to know all about the horse and assured me Flack would not sell him. The big bay was the one thing in the world Flack would not sell.

Then I told him about taking the big bay and riding him to Tucson and back. And about Flack in Tucson yelling "Horse thief!" at me and most everybody in Tucson coming out to shoot at me. I was still angry about that, and now I was angry at Saturnino because he sat down on a bale of hay and laughed until the tears ran down his cheeks.

I told him, "I don't see anything funny."

That set him off again, and I told him he was acting like a hysterical female. I thought then he would never stop laughing.

"Just the same," I said, "I'm going to have that horse." I went along the row of stalls until I found the sorrel, my own Arrowhead horse. He seemed to be glad to see me. I pulled his ears, and he showed the whites of his eyes and bit at me. But it was in fun.

The loose planks of the bridge rumbled under us as we rode out of Sacaton City. Saturnino slouched around in the saddle looking back up the one dusty street. "I think," he said, "that today the Sacaton City makes the celebration. Have the big drunk."

The ponies fell into the easy lope of the cow horse going somewhere. The hot sun of Arizona stabbed at us, and the fine dust drifted up. Saturnino became philosophical. "That," he said, "is the way it is. It is the pitcher that goes to the well too many times. The killer, in the end, finds the man who is too quick for him."

I said: "Now look, Saturnino, let's forget it. I don't regret

it. I had to kill him or be killed. And I'm glad I'm alive. But I would rather never hear it mentioned again."

Saturnino protested. "But, Petey. That is not the way. You wish to bury it in the head and wake up in the night to make the think. That is not the way. You must take it out in the daylight and take a look." He flipped out his open palm and examined it. "You must make the talk and not the think. Then it is of the no matter."

He shot me a sudden, hooded-eye look. "I know."

I told him, "Just the same, let's forget it." As if it could be forgotten, ever.

The road was familiar now. It seemed like home. It was home. I was going home to Gail Gordon. I felt the heavy belt sagging down from my waist. The papers from the Land Office and the relinquishment in favor of Gail Gordon were there in the belt. She could keep her home now. She could go down to Tucson, produce the relinquishment, and make her own filing on the east half of Section 9. A warm glow crept through me. It is, I thought, all fixed up now. I could not foresee that, as a matter of fact, it was just getting started.

I came back from my daydreams to hear Saturnino say, "Two men come."

I switched around in the saddle to look away down the long slopes behind me. A stream of dust drifted up from under two horses down on the flats. At that distance they seemed to move very slowly. Just that long stream of dust drifting away to windward from under the feet of the two bobbing figures.

Saturnino said, "Not Idaho."

I asked, "What about Idaho?"

"When I rode to find the good Idaho he send Fred and all the boys back to the ranch. He ride to Tucson. Through the hills." His grave dark eyes examined the two men. "Not Idaho," he said.

Then the thing that had been in the back of my mind all the forenoon came out. "Scarface and Whitey," I said.

Saturnino shot a quick look at me, and then shook his head. "Not Scarface and not Whitey," he pronounced. He continued to look at me, and then nodded. "But of course, Petey, you will have to kill the Scarface and Whitey."

I said, "Shut up," and kicked at the sorrel. And I rode with my head on my shoulder, watching those two small figures that were eating up my trail.

CHAPTER X

SATURNINO AND I topped the last rise, and the Arrowhead lay below us. Beyond the dull green of the cottonwood grove was the gleaming white of one corner of the house. The house of Gail Gordon. It was safe for her now. I had made the filing and had the relinquishment in my belt. No one could take her home. "I serve a very great lady."

Down to the right lay the incredible green of the alfalfa field. After the brown burnt-up land that field of green seemed a symbol of all living things. Beyond, the little river sparkled in the hot sunlight. Running water and growing green things—that you do not think about, that you take for granted, until you look out across a hundred miles of blistering sun-baked desert.

The heavy foothills, the gaunt ribs of the high peaks, shouldered in to enclose the Arrowhead and the life-giving water. Away up and beyond, the great peak of the Sycatons rested against a clear blue. The great peak was aloof, indif-

ferent, serenely secure against all the little wars of the animals that crawled and lived along its flanks.

We rode into the shade under the cottonwoods, and the house gleamed white at the end of the cool green tunnel. The hollyhocks flamed against the white wall. (It is her home, I was thinking, and I have saved it for her.)

Saturnino broke into my thoughts. "The boys are all home now," he said. "We have the fun when the boys all are home."

We came out of the shade and saw Footless standing at the wagon tire, the iron bar in his hand, shading his eyes with his hand, staring at us. He asked, "Hey, where you been?"

Before I could stop him Saturnino waved a hand at me. "Take the good look, Señor Footless," he said. "Take the good look at Petey. He have the fight and kill Panhandle."

I said, "Oh, for God's sake shut up!"

Footless let his eyes and jaws open wide and left them that way. Then he said, "Hunh?"

Saturnino said: "But yes. In the fair duel in the street in Sacaton, Petey kill Panhandle."

It seemed to take Footless some time to adjust his ideas. Then he broke into a wild clamor. Yelling, "Panhandle? Panhandle!" he whirled around on his peg leg and began beating furiously on the wagon tire.

The clamor from the iron tire slammed against the hills and was thrown back down. The crazy Footless was yelling something about "Panhandle" and "Petey." Men began to appear, looking out of windows and coming around corners. The men of the Arrowhead, lean, burned dark by the sun—hard-faced men, carrying an air of complete competence. My heart went out to them. They were to be my friends. I was to be one of them.

The infernal clamor of Footless got on my nerves. "Shut up!" I yelled at him. "Shut up, you damn fool!"

Footless stopped banging on the tire and shook his iron

bar at me, yelling: "There he is. That's him. The smoothest gun fighter in Arizona. What'd I tell you? What'd I tell you?"

I said, "Oh, for God's sake, cut it out!"

Saturnino, there on his horse beside me, flashed his white teeth in a delighted smile. He seemed to be enormously pleased. He said, "But, Petey, let the good Footless have his pleasure."

I shrugged at that. And then I began to notice things. It took a long time for me to realize that Footless was alone in his boisterous enthusiasm. There were a dozen men in sight now. Lean, dark, hard-faced men looking at me, level-eyed.

Men with belts and guns and cold eyes that bored into me. The sweat that ran down my belly turned bitterly cold. I lifted my head to sniff at what seemed a cold wind drifting down from the great peaks. I didn't understand what was going on.

Those men, those lean, dark hard-faced men looking at me. Looking without any friendliness. Under my breath I asked, "What's the matter?"

The office door opened, and old Idaho stepped down into the sunlight. His face was drawn and haggard as he buckled on his gun—the face of an old, old man who had spent two days and a night in the saddle and had ridden furiously to come to some great disappointment.

The girl was in the doorway behind Idaho. She gave me a glance and then looked away.

I had started to grin and wave my hand when I saw her, and then I realized the complete coldness of her glance. It was a look that put me completely away, afar off, utterly out of her life.

Again I whispered, "What is the matter?" I looked around at the hard-faced men of the Arrowhead and slowly came to realize their unfriendliness. I couldn't understand.

I had found that Section 9, the girl's home place, was vacant land. I had filed on it, making it safe; then I made out

a relinquishment to her. Had it in my belt. I had that up. Then I had come alive out of the fight with Panhandle. Now I was back at the Arrowhead. I suppose I expected cheers and the fatted calf. Probably I expected seven fatted calves. And I met nothing but hatred.

A man came around the corner of the bunkhouse with a coil of rope in his left hand. With his right hand he was whipping out a loop in the rope.

That damned Fred tipped his head back to look at me from under his black hat brim. "That's right," he said, "that's right. Git a rope on him. That sycamore down the creek has got a strong limb. The place we hanged that other feller."

"Hanged that other feller" sang in my ears, but it didn't make sense. What were they talking about? Who was going to hang whom?

The girl stepped down from the door of the office. I was intensely conscious of her presence. I saw the white shirt open at the throat and the swell of her breasts. Her blue-jean overalls were tucked into high-heeled boots that had incredibly small feet. I had thought her eyes were blue, but now they were pools of troubled night.

She spoke crisply. "Andy! Andrew Jackson. Put that rope back on your saddle!"

Somebody pleaded, "Aw, now, Gail—"

I still didn't know what it was all about.

Then the icy points of the eyes of old Idaho were boring into me. He had come quite close, and spoke in a cool drawl. "Either you are the dumbest fool on earth or you got more guts than I have."

I was still asking, "What's the matter?"

Idaho put it into words. "That Flack tipped me off that day you came here. Tipped me off you had been fooling around the Land Office in Tucson. It didn't mean nothing to me then. But I was in Tucson yestiddy and I see you filed on the east half of Section 9."

I heard a growl from the men of the Arrowhead. They were closing in, coming toward me, hands hanging beside the butts of their six-shooters.

Old Idaho went on. "You rode up here to look the place over. You killed Joe because Joe had found out. Now you go down and file. And now you ain't got no more sense than come back here."

I heard the sullen growl of hunting wolves.

Idaho went on talking. "You figure you can establish residence? Make a go of it?" His cold eyes bored into me. "Think you can git away with it?"

I started to protest, "But, Idaho, Idaho—"

Idaho stepped back and moved his hand as though he was finished. The man with the rope flipped out the loop again. Fred growled, "Git a rope on him, Andy."

It was only then that I saw the whole situation. To those men I was a double-crossing traitor. I had discovered the mistake in the Land Office, and I had filed on the Arrowhead homestead—and now they were going to hang me.

I suppose it was all very simple to them. With me twisting around at the end of a rope from the sycamore down the creek the girl could go in and make her own filing. It was as simple as that. Just that I should cease to exist.

The girl walked briskly down toward me. "Stop it! I won't have it!" She looked up at me, standing at the head of my horse. "Did you file on my home?" Her voice was insistent: "Did you?"

Relief swept over me. I laughed. "Of course I did. I fixed it all up."

I put my hand down to unbuckle my belt and get out the relinquishment. Then a rope slapped down and was yanked tight, tying my arms to my sides.

A horrified voice said, "Good Gawd! He was going to pull a gun on Gail!"

I think something snapped in my head then. I guess I went crazy. I yelled at the men of the Arrowhead and cursed them up and down bitterly. I had tried to save the place for them, and this was what I got. I was engulfed with bitterness. I dared them to hang me, to do anything to me. I told them I owned the place and I was going to live in it and all hell couldn't stop me.

In the midst of my bitter rage I heard the girl's cool voice: "Andy. Andy, take that rope off!"

A voice pleaded, "Aw, now, Gail."

Then the rope loosened, and I flipped it up over my head. Then I listened to Gail Gordon.

"I'll keep the boys here," she was telling me. "You can have the horse. And you better ride. Better ride hard. Try Mexico. It is not far."

I thought I saw her face crumple into tears, and then I heard horses coming up through the cottonwood grove.

I watched her straight back as it went away. In my heart I called out to her, Oh, Gail, Gail, Gail!

Saturnino was talking, talking angrily. "But, Idaho," he was protesting, "we do not yet hear what Petey say. I do not think Petey is the so bad one."

I felt a great wave of love for Saturnino. I wondered where Slim was, and what he would think. And in the back of my head I was conscious all the time of the sound of horses coming up the lane through the cottonwoods.

They were all looking now, looking to see the riders come out from under the trees. There were two of them. The old man in the lead seemed faintly familiar, and then I remembered the kindly old gentleman who had looked down at me over his glasses that morning in Tucson: the man who was standing under the sign, "Tom Morgan—Sheriff."

The old man raised his right hand, palm outward, saying, "How, Idaho. How."

Idaho flipped up his open hand. "How, Tom. How."

I had a vague notion that two old Indian fighters were greeting each other in the talk of the Great Plains.

Idaho said: "Git down, Tom. Git down and let your saddle have a rest."

Tom Morgan said, "Not yet." He fished inside his vest and brought out a folded paper. "I got a warrant here, Idaho. A warrant for one of the Arrowhead boys."

I heard a distinct noise of derision from the lean hard-faced Arrowhead men.

Fred tipped his head back and broke out: "By Gawd, Tom, you got a nerve bringing a warrant up here. The Arrowhead does its own justice and does its own hanging."

A man laughed. "You tell 'em, Fred."

The girl had turned around, listening to the talk. She asked, "Who is the warrant for, Tom?"

The sheriff said, "Peter Stirling."

Gail Gordon said, "Peter Stirling is not connected with the Arrowhead." She turned away and went into the office. The door was shut quite firmly. She had shut the door on me for good and all. Again my heart cried out to her, "Oh, Gail, Gail, how can you?"

Then I felt a jab in my back, under the right elbow. I knew it was a six-shooter. A cool voice said, "Raise your right hand." I raised my right hand.

The cool voice said, "Now with your left hand jest unbuckle your belt and let it slide off." After a minute the voice added: "Don't try no false moves. I ain't taking no chances with a killer."

"Taking chances with a killer? Taking chances with a killer?" The words went through me and didn't mean anything. He couldn't be talking about me.

The gun was jabbed in my back, and the voice said, "Go on."

I said: "You can't do that. I'm keeping the belt. My—my money is in the belt."

Then I noticed Garvey for the first time. He spat a long stream of tobacco juice and snickered. He asked, "Who put the money in your belt?"

I had the idle thought that Garvey must have shaved, for his reddish patchy beard was just the same length it had been the last time I saw him. I told the voice back of me: "You can pull out the gun yourself. I won't give up the belt."

The old Sheriff said, "Take his gun."

I felt the drag as the man pulled the six-shooter out of my holster. I snarled at him: "You better be careful of it. It's loaded."

Saturnino laughed out loud. Then he protested: "But, Señor Sheriff, the killing of Panhandle was a very fair fight. I see it all myself. The Panhandle force the fight on my friend Petey."

The Sheriff waved that aside, "Oh, it ain't that," he said. He spoke as if that was a very trivial affair. "Always glad to see killers killing each other," he said.

He unfolded the paper in his hand, held it away at arm's length so that his old eyes could focus on it. "This," he said, "is a warrant sworn to by Flack. It is for horse stealing."

"For horse stealing." I looked at the Sheriff, goggle-eyed. "For horse stealing?" Then I began to laugh. I suppose it was a letdown—or else hysteria. I had taken it for granted I was to be accused of murder. I began to realize how much I had hated and feared being accused of murder. And now I was to be arrested for horse stealing. I doubled over the saddle horn and yelled with laughter.

"But look," I protested. I gulped and yelled and tried to talk. "But now look. I didn't steal the horse. I put him back in the barn in Sacaton. He's there now." I wiped my eyes on my sleeve. "And besides I'm buying the horse. I wrote Flack a

letter telling him I would pay whatever he asked. I only borrowed the horse."

The Sheriff said: "Oh, you only borrowed the horse. I've heard about borrowing horses. In fact, I've helped hang some people who only borrowed a horse."

Then I looked around at the men of the Arrowhead. Plainly they saw nothing funny about being accused of horse stealing.

Afterward I came to know their attitude, perhaps to myself approve of it. A fight, a killing, was in the nature of things, was a personal matter between the two men, and nobody else's business. But to steal a horse was the ultimate crime, the unforgivable sin.

To steal a horse, to set a man afoot in the desolate, inhospitable country, was to condemn him to a horrible death by thirst. The tradition, I suppose, had followed the horse itself all the way from the far-off desert steppes of central Asia.

Saturnino broke in again, and I loved him for it. "But, Don Idaho," he was saying, "it is something all to the wrong."

But no one paid attention to Saturnino. The Sheriff and old Idaho were looking at each other. The Sheriff said: "I don't want to have no trouble, Idaho. You know I don't. Do I get my prisoner?"

That was something else I couldn't understand. The Sheriff with a warrant was asking old Idaho if he could have his prisoner. And old Idaho was standing with his feet straddled, teetering up and down, pulling at his sweeping mustache.

I noticed that the other men were all looking at Idaho, waiting for orders. I wished again that Slim was there. I saw the leering pleasure in Garvey's face and the cold hostility in Fred's.

Old Idaho said, "You know, Tom, your writs don't run on the Arrowhead," and I felt a leap of hope.

The Sheriff spoke mildly, arguing casually with an old friend, shaking his head a little. "You know them times is

changed, Idaho. It ain't like it was. We got law in the Territory now."

Fred tipped his head back to ask sourly, "Who's law, and who says so?"

But we were listening to Idaho talking to the Sheriff. He grinned in a friendly, indulgent way at the Sheriff and the law. "Mebbeso," he said. "Mebbeso. But it ain't got nothing to do with this case. Sure, you get your prisoner. He ain't nothing to the Arrowhead."

Suddenly the air was filled with the infernal clangor of the iron tire. Footless was hammering away at it with his iron bar. He stopped to yell, "Come and git it, or I'll throw it out." Then he hitched around on his peg leg and bobbed into the cookhouse.

A tension seemed to snap. Men loosened their muscles, some laughed, and they moved away. Idaho said: "Get down, Tom, get down, you and your deputy. After we eat, the boys will run in some fresh horses for you."

The Sheriff slid off his horse. "That's a right good idea." He turned to his deputy. "You keep your eyes on him. Sockeye. Don't take no chances with a killer."

The deputy, Sockeye, nodded his moon face and told me: "Git down. We eats here."

I said, "I'll get down, but I'll be damned if I eat here."

Idaho, Tom Morgan, and Sockeye looked at me, surprised. Idaho said, "That ain't no way to act."

"You can go to hell."

Sockeye spoke in an astonished voice: "Not eat? You ain't eating?"

I tried to mimic him in a mincing voice, "Not eat," I said. "I ain't eating. Not here."

The Sheriff said: "It'll be a long time. Better eat."

I said, "Go to hell," and slid off the horse. I sat down on the ground and began to roll a cigarette. In spite of practice I still could not roll a decent one.

The Sheriff sighed. "Well, Sockeye, you watch him. I'll eat, and then you can eat."

Sockeye got off his horse with his six-shooter in his hand and stood near me. Idaho yelled, "Manuel! Manuel!"

Manuel came with his opaque eyes sliding across all of us, picked up the reins of the three horses, and walked away toward the corrals.

Idaho and Tom Morgan stood for a minute looking down at me; then they shrugged their shoulders and followed the others to the cookhouse.

Saturnino still sat his horse, his elbows on the saddle horn looking down at me. He shook his head sadly. "Something is very much all wrong." Then he spoke to me, "I bring you something to eat, Petey."

"No! I won't eat here!"

Saturnino nodded as if he understood, kicked up his horse, and rode down after Manuel.

I wanted to look around and see if Gail Gordon was in sight, but I knew she was not. Probably she would never be in sight—for me. Well, to hell with her too!

As I sat there on the ground I could hear the rattle of dishes as hungry men ate happily. I could hear talk and laughter, and I was engulfed in loneliness. I grew bitter and wanted to insult somebody, to take it out on some one. "You better watch yourself, Mister Sockeye," I snarled at the deputy. "I might do something to you."

He looked at me quite coolly. "Don't try it," he said.

I began to get dreadfully hungry. I could smell the food from the cookhouse, and my stomach felt empty. Part of the time I was in a rage at Gail Gordon, at Idaho, at the whole Arrowhead outfit. And part of the time I felt just plain silly, sitting there in the dirt and sunshine.

The men came out picking their teeth, talking casually, casting curious glances at me, going on about their business. Manuel came up leading three saddled horses.

Idaho and Tom Morgan came out talking earnestly. The Sheriff had a huge sandwich in his hand, and I became intolerably hungry. The two old men stopped a minute to go on talking, then came down to us. The Sheriff took a swift, sideways look at the sun and spoke to the deputy. "We got to make the Tucson stage, Sockeye, so you'll have to eat riding." He gave Sockeye the sandwich.

The Sheriff spoke to me, mildly. "I'd like right well to get you a sandwich. Footless can have it ready in no time."

I said, "To hell with it!"

Saturnino came down, walking briskly. He threw his arm across my shoulders, but I shook him off. I was afraid I was going to cry at his trust and friendly arm.

The deputy shoved his gun forward and spoke to Saturnino, sharply. "Git away from him! You want him to grab your gun?"

Saturnino flashed his white teeth in a gay smile at the deputy. "I think," he said, "it is that we are all the big fool."

As I slid up onto the horse Saturnino smiled at me. "But it is not to make the worry, Don Petey. I see you in Tucson. Me and the Slim one."

The Sheriff spoke severely. "Now none of that, Saturnino. None of that."

I saw the gay glare of the hollyhocks along the front of the white house. My eyes swept the windows, but there was no sign of Gail Gordon. The shadows of the cottonwoods covered us for a cool moment; then we rode out into the hot dusty sunshine of southern Arizona. I rode beside the old Sheriff, and Sockeye came behind, eating dust and sandwich. "And," I told the deputy over my shoulder, "I hope it chokes you."

CHAPTER XI

WE HAD supper in the Chinaman's restaurant in Sacaton City. Now that I could have all the food I wanted I was not so hungry after all. The Chinaman was quite happy because a lot of dusty, sunburnt men came in to supper. I realized, after a while, that they came in to look at me.

We walked down to the hotel and climbed into the stage. It smelled of dust and leather and swayed as we got in. Men came up to talk to Tom Morgan and Sockeye. A lot of men, saying, "Hello, Tom" and "Hello, Sockeye," and talking about nothing at all. They were standing there talking and letting their eyes slide around and over me. One man spoke to another in a subdued voice: "Yeah, he killed Panhandle."

So that was it. I was ticketed as the man who had killed Panhandle. They had, it seemed, a considerable respect for the man who had killed Panhandle.

But I didn't want any of it and snarled at Tom Morgan, "Is this stage nailed down?"

The Sheriff stuck his head out the window and spoke to the driver. Then the bewhiskered driver said, "Right now, Tom," and yelled, "Turn 'em loose!"

Men scattered, the four horses jumped, and we were thrown back against the seats. The horses were on the run, and the planks of the bridge seemed to rise up and hammer the bottom of the stage. Across the bridge, the horses quieted

down to a fast trot. We turned left onto the Tucson road, and the long, tiresome drag began.

I was sitting on the front seat, back to the horses. Tom Morgan and his deputy Sockeye were on the back seat facing forward. I noticed that Sockeye still had my six-shooter. He had stuck it inside the waistband of his overalls. The little gate where you shove in the cartridges was pulled out and made a hook that held the gun in place. (A good way to carry a gun, I thought, if you want it in a hurry.)

Sockeye said, "You better get some sleep, Tom."

The old Sheriff said, "Mebbeso I will."

I asked the deputy, "Why do they call you 'Sockeye'?"

Tom Morgan laughed. "Canned salmon is his favorite fruit," he explained.

The deputy looked annoyed.

"Well, Sockeye," I said, "I hope you will take good care of my gun. I may need it some time."

Sockeye asked, "So?"

Then a frightening thought came to me, and I spoke earnestly to the Sheriff. "Now look. Scarface and Whitey are around here somewhere. They are not going to like me much."

Tom Morgan grinned at that. "No. More'n likely they ain't going to like you much."

"They may hold us up," I told him. "May try to get me. Don't I get my gun?"

The Sheriff shook his head. "Ain't nobody going to hold us up," he said. "Ain't nobody going to take you away from us. And you going to get no gun."

"But now look," I protested, and I was very much in earnest, "if they do attack us I ought to have a chance for my life."

Sockeye spat out the window. It was obvious I was making what he considered a childish attempt to talk them out of a gun. "Forget it," he said. "Go to sleep."

The stage had slouched down off the bench and was winding around through the mesquite and catclaw forest. I thought, again, that I recognized the place where I had left the chaps and stuck my head out the window. But I couldn't be sure. And besides, if I suggested stopping to look for them they would think I was trying some sort of game. When I pulled my head back in the stage I saw their eyes were fastened on me, alert with caution. Sockeye had even moved his hand in toward the butt of my gun stuck in his waistband.

"That's right," I sneered at them. "You better watch me."

Sockeye spoke soberly, "I aim to."

I said, "Oh, hell!" and spread myself out on the seat trying to find a comfortable way to sleep. Every time I opened my eyes I met the alert look of Sockeye. I had to laugh.

The heat had gone out of the sun. Again it hung, very low down, away across the flats of the Sacaton and the desert beyond. Enormous, blood-red, it seemed to hold a threat of heat and dust and blood. Then it was gone.

I thought of those men in Sacaton City, looking at me with respect and interest, telling one another, "Yeah, he killed Panhandle."

But I hadn't wanted to kill Panhandle, hadn't wanted to kill or be killed. All I wanted was to be let alone, to work for the Arrowhead, to learn the cow business, and to take Gail Gordon in my arms.

Now I was outlawed from the Arrowhead, going to jail for horse stealing, and would be killed on sight by Scarface and Whitey. (And your luck, I told myself, will not last forever.)

I opened my eyes and saw that Tom Morgan had been watching me. He had evidently been thinking about me and finished his thoughts out loud. "And," he told me, "you'll be a lot safer in jail."

The darkness was shutting down on the dusty earth. The lemon-peel new moon hung in the sky a little longer than the other time.

"How long do they keep you in jail for horse stealing?" I asked the Sheriff.

"The last one went to the pen for seven years."

Sockeye said, "Most generally we don't git hold of 'em."

"Why not?"

Sockeye shrugged, "They is usually hung afore we git to them."

"Thank you so much, dear, dear Sockeye."

But I had, I thought, better think about it. Perhaps I had better wire Dad. But I was not going to do that. Not yet.

Then homesickness swept over me. They would have the sloop out now. Dad and Sister Jane and old Paulson the butler, beating up to get around Point Judith and out beyond Cape Cod for a clear run down the Maine coast. Old Paulson, the butler, had been a British man, a war man in his young days. Now, in the summer vacation, he was in command of the sloop, and very much in command. Good old Paulson, he was practically the only mother Jane and I had known.

A jerking lurch of the stage brought me back to Arizona. It was dark now, the half-darkness of the starlit desert. The faces of Tom Morgan and Sockeye were pale ovals against the back seat. They were both looking at me.

It must be all Flack, I thought. Flack is at the bottom of the whole business. He had found out that the Arrowhead was vacant land. He must have had some scheme that he was not yet ready to start. But he could not have any one else knowing. That was why he had been suspicious when he saw me at the Land Office my first day in Tucson and then found me at the Arrowhead. That was why he wanted to get me out of the country, why Panhandle, Scarface, and Whitey had ordered me out, and it was why Panhandle had tried to kill me.

And Joe. Why, of course! Joe had found out about the section corner. Flack was there that first morning I came to

the Arrowhead. Joe had foolishly said something about it to Flack, and so Flack had killed him!

"Of course!" I half yelled, and sat up in the stage. "Of course Flack killed Joe!"

Then I was looking into the muzzle of a six-shooter and Sockeye was saying: "None of that! None of that!"

I laughed. "Don't worry, Sockeye. I was not making a break. I just thought of something."

Tom Morgan spoke soberly. "And I wouldn't think of it any more if I was you. Flack is a much respected man around here."

"He would be," I told him.

And then a frightening thought came to me: If Flack really was trying to get possession of the Arrowhead he must know by now that I had filed on it. And I had ninety days in which to establish residence. But if I should die then the land would be vacant again. "And that," I told myself, "is why Panhandle tried to kill me—and why Scarface or Whitey will very probably succeed."

But the relinquishment I had signed would protect Gail Gordon—if she knew about it and acted in time. I wished I had told somebody about the papers in my belt. I should have told Saturnino. The chubby-faced lawyer, Willard Wallace, knew about it but would not know what it was all about.

I had acted childishly up at the Arrowhead. Then resentment came back to me. Damn old Idaho and Fred and Garvey and the rest of them! They should not have taken it for granted that I was a thief and a liar.

My heart warmed to Saturnino, who had taken my side and told them there was something all wrong. I wondered about Slim. Saturnino said Slim was in Tucson. I must see him—see him and tell him the whole thing. Slim would know what to do.

I woke in the darkness when the stage stopped, and forgot a long time to remember where I was. Horses were walking

around, horses rattling, and men talking in subdued voices. A man said: "Yeah. He killed Panhandle." I wondered if all my life I was going to hear men say: "Yeah. He killed Panhandle."

Then a voice broke in protest. "Naw, it weren't for that. He stole a whole herd of Flack's horses."

I spoke to Sockeye. "So now it was a whole herd. I suppose when we get to Tucson it will be all the horses in Arizona Territory."

Sockeye grunted something. The stage sagged as Tom Morgan climbed back in. The driver asked, "You all set, Tom?" and the stage was nearly pulled out from under us as the fresh horses surged into the collar.

Again the sun of a new day was glinting out the white walls of the old Mission as we came up onto the bench and headed at a stiff trot for Tucson. Nobody paid any attention to the stage as we rolled in between the low adobe houses. The Sheriff stuck his head through the window and yelled at the driver. The stage pulled up in front of a restaurant, and we got out stiffly. Tom Morgan looked up and down the street and then said, "We'll eat here."

It was hot when we came out from breakfast. I said, "It's hot."

The Sheriff said, "It'll be cooler in jail."

We went under the sign "Tom Morgan—Sheriff" into a disorderly room, containing a roll-top desk, a table, some heavy chairs, and several spittoons. There were small posters on the wall—posters with pictures of men and the words "Wanted for Murder" or "Wanted for Robbery" in large black letters.

Well, I thought, they won't need a poster for me.

There was a dimly lighted hall with cells on each side and a very disagreeable smell. The cell doors were made of two-by-four timbers bolted together and padlocked.

I said, "I've been in better jails than this."

Tom Morgan grunted. "Got a record, have you? I ain't doubting it."

I laughed. In New Haven, in my sophomore year, a half-dozen of us had been jailed for "drunk and disorderly." In the morning some grinning and perfectly friendly cops had told us to beat it and try to behave ourselves. That was a million years ago.

I told the Sheriff, "I want to see a lawyer."

He was surprised. "A lawyer?"

"Yes, one lawyer. Named Willard Wallace."

"Never heard of him."

"He has an office up the street here," I told him. "Hasn't been here long. Young fellow. Fat."

The Sheriff said: "All right. I'll get him soon's I got time." He started away and then came back. "Mebbeso you're figuring on getting out on bail or some such. I wouldn't do it if I was you."

"Why?"

He seemed hesitant but decided to go on. "Well, it's a lot safer in jail. You know that. We don't like hoss thieves around here." He added, warningly, "Better stay in jail."

"But I'm not a horse thief," I protested.

He shrugged his shoulders. "You're the only one who thinks so."

The heavy cell door swung shut. There was the click of the padlock. The sheriff shook the lock to see if it was fastened, and stumped down the hall toward his office. And I sat on a cot looking at the inch-wide cracks between the two-by-fours that made the door of the cell.

So I was "safer in jail." I thought that over. I think that it was then I began to realize that I was in a really precarious situation. Up to now it had seemed funny, a good deal of a joke, that I should be jailed for horse stealing—more or less like that time in New Haven. I think I expected the old Sheriff or the deputy, Sockeye, would come around soon,

give me an indulgent lecture, and tell me to beat it and try to behave myself. But this was not going to be anything like that. These people were serious.

Then it came to me with a shock that they did not regard me as a half-baked kid, like the New Haven cops. I remembered the respectful whispers of the men looking into the stage in Sacaton City. "Yeah, he killed Panhandle." I wanted, desperately, to see Slim and Saturnino.

I became frightened, restless, and could no longer sit still on the small cot. I walked up and down the cell, rolling and smoking cigarettes. Three steps forward and three back. And then I remembered a black Java panther in the Zoo in New York. It walked back and forth, back and forth, all day long. I knew, now, how it felt, and I would never again stand and stare at an animal in a cage.

Then the matches were gone and I shook the cell door. The timbers rattled and banged and echoed. Down the passage somebody cursed sleepily. I yelled: "Sockeye. Sockeye!"

After a long time Sockeye stumped up, his spurs rattling as he walked, and put one eye to a crack. The rest of his face was hidden by the two-by-four. "What you want?" he asked.

"Matches."

"Oh, matches!" He stood looking at me. "I ain't sure you're supposed to have matches."

"Oh, for Gawd's sake!"

Sockeye mumbled something, then fished a block of sulphur matches out of his blue jeans and poked it through the crack. "And if you set the jail afire you'll burn yourself to death."

I said, "You're a fool."

"Think so?" Sockeye started away.

I called to him, "Where's that lawyer?" Then I asked, "Have you seen Slim? Find Slim, and tell him I want to see him."

"All right. All right. Soon as I got time."

It was maddening to be locked up, to be utterly dependent on some one for matches, for everything. I went back and sat down on the cot, leaning back against the rough, white-washed adobe wall. The sun shone through the small square window high above my head, and there was a diamond-shaped yellow patch of sunlight on the floor down to my left. There were three black stripes across the yellow patch.

When I woke up my neck was stiff from leaning and sleeping against the wall. It took a minute to gather up in my mind all that had happened. The yellow patch on the floor had shifted its position. It was nearly in front of me now, oblong-shaped, but the three black bars were still across it. Nearly noon, I thought, and immediately was hungry. I wondered if they brought food in or if they took me out to a restaurant, or if they did nothing at all. I wanted to go to a restaurant. It was maddening to sit there completely helpless.

Then a door opened, voices and footsteps came along the passage. (So, I thought, I do get something to eat.)

The steps stopped at the door of my cage, the padlock rattled, and I heard the old Sheriff talking in a respectful voice. "Jest as you say, Flack," he was saying. "Mebbeso you're right."

Then the door swung open and Tom Morgan said, "Here's Flack come to see you."

So Flack came in. I sat back on the cot and looked at his heavy shoulders, his neckless head, and the pale flat eyes that flicked swiftly around the cell and came to rest on me.

He had on his genial air. His lips curved in a smile, but the eyes were flat and watching. He stuck out his hand, speaking with hearty friendliness: "Well, well, young man. This is all too bad. Too bad."

He seemed to think it necessary to establish his position. I let him talk.

"I'm sorry, my boy," he said. "I'm very sorry. I didn't recognize you on my bay horse. Of course, if I had recognized you

I would have known it was all right. Why, of course, of course! Ride any of my horses any time. Any time."

I remembered that somewhere, some time, somebody had told me to let them talk. Let them talk.

I asked, "Is that so?"

Flack said: "Why, of course. Of course." He pulled out the one wooden kitchen chair in the cell and settled himself in it. He put his short, fat fingers on his pudgy knees and looked at me very kindly. "Why, of course," he said.

"Did you get the letter I left in the corral?" I asked him.

"Why, yes," he answered. "Yes, of course. That's how I knew it was you and that I had made a mistake. A very bad mistake."

"Will you sell the horse?" I asked.

"Well now, well now. You see, that bay is my private horse. Quite a pet, in fact."

I told him, "I thought you would sell anything."

He laughed at that, his completely mirthless laugh. "Well, of course, anything in reason. Anything in reason, you know."

Flack leaned forward to smile at me. I think he was trying to show benevolence. "But I just dropped in," he said, "to tell you I'm sorry about the mistake I made. And of course," he went on, "I'm not pressing the charge."

"Not pressing the charge?" I asked. "What does that mean?"

"Why, it means there ain't no charge. I've told Tom Morgan I made a mistake." He spoke earnestly. "A bad mistake, and I would not appear against you."

"So you see"—his lips smiled again—"so you see, you're a free man."

He leaned forward to give my knee a friendly slap. Without thinking, I jerked the knee aside with a feeling of revulsion at being touched by Flack. He paid no attention.

"And I got a proposition to make," he went on. "I heard you had filed on the Arrowhead land." He gave me what went for an admiring look. "Smart," he said, "smart." Then

he lowered his voice. "But just a little too smart. You can't get away with it."

"I got ninety days in which to establish residence," I told him.

Flack gave his mirthless laugh at that. He spoke indulgently. "Now really," he asked, "do you think the Arrowhead crowd would let you? Don't you know you wouldn't last nine minutes?"

Well, of course, I knew that.

Then Flack went on again quite friendly. I think he considered it a fatherly manner. "Now I'll tell you what we'll do," he said. "I've known Gail Gordon all her life. I think a lot of Gail. A whole lot. I've wanted to do something for her a long time." He hitched forward in his chair. "Now I'll tell you what we'll do. I'll buy your relinquishment. You sell me the relinquishment, and I'll make it over to Gail. Give it to her for a birthday present."

I started to speak and he held up his hand. The palm of his hand, I noticed, was as flat as the front and back of his head. "Now wait a minute. You can't sell the Arrowhead any relinquishment. They ain't buying. You try and take possession, and they'll kill you. Now don't forget that—they will very surely kill you."

Well, I knew that too.

"But I'll buy it," he said. "That way you'll get some money out of having made a smart move. I'll have the pleasure of making Gail Gordon a nice present, and she will have her home." He asked, brightly, "Now, how's that?"

I disliked having Flack call me smart. God knew I had intended only to make her home safe. I thought again of the scent at the Arrowhead.

"Just how much would you pay, Mr. Flack?" I asked him.

"Well now," he said, "what do you say to the tidy sum of five hundred?"

His flat eyes watched me. As I didn't seem very enthusiastic he added, "I might even throw in that bay horse."

"That," I told him, "would be very nice."

He was quite cheerful. "Then you'll do it?" he asked.

"Of course, since you're going to make her a present of it I shall make the relinquishment out to her."

The brightness left his face, and impatience, dislike, came to his flat eyes and were brushed away. "Why, no," he said, "not that way. I want to make the present."

We looked at each other then. I had never before seen cold hate shine out of a man's eyes, but I saw it now. "Why, no," he spoke softly, "not that way."

His pale flat eyes were fastened on me. I felt cold shivers run up my back. And I suddenly realized that it was hot. The sweat came out on my forehead. A cold drop of sweat ran from my throat down my belly.

How long we looked at each other in the silent cell, I do not know. Then I spoke flippantly. "Well, anyway, I wasn't planning to sell. After all," I told him, lightly, "I have filed. It's my land. Guess I'll get the President to send the Army and put me in possession."

He was still looking at me with his cold flat face. After a long time he almost whispered, "I think you don't understand."

I stretched and yawned as though I was bored with it all. "Oh, yes," I told him, "I understand."

"That's your last word?" he asked, and the words came out as flat and cold as his face.

He looked at me a long time, and I became uneasy. Malevolence, a very spirit of evil, crept into the cell.

I cleared my throat in order to speak. "And I suppose now," I asked him, "and I suppose now you'll press the charge for horse stealing?"

He gave a slight start, for he had been thinking of some-

thing else. He shrugged his heavy shoulders and got up without answering. At the cell door he stopped and looked back at me, flicking his eyes around in his flat face. He spoke softly, and in his words I could read sentence of death. "Oh, no! No. I'll not press the charge. You are going out a free man."

I stared at where he had been and began to chill and sweat again. I thought of the evil Scarface and the girlish giggle of Whitey. I was scared.

So I was going out a free man. Going out into the sunlight. Going out quite free—and I did not have the least doubt that when I stepped out into that sunlight I should be dead.

A door slammed at the end of the corridor, and I recognized the jingling steps of the Sheriff. Old Tom Morgan came and opened the cell door. He had on his steel-bowed spectacles, and looked down at me over their tops. It gave him a benevolent look. He said: "Sockeye will bring you some dinner. What you want?"

I had forgotten about eating. "But Flack says he is not pressing the charge," I told the Sheriff. "So I suppose I am free." I got up from the cot. "I'll eat at a restaurant."

The Sheriff shook his head. "You ain't eating at no restaurant." He fingered his lower lip and kept looking at me over his spectacles. After a while he said: "Flack ain't sticking to his sworn warrant, and we can't hold you. But I ain't letting you go. Not yet."

"You can't do that," I protested.

"You jest think I can't." He spoke mildly. "Ain't never been nothing like that happened to me before, and it ain't going to happen now."

"Like what?" I asked.

He did not answer directly. He shook his head. "Ain't no man ever been took away from me. And there ain't going to be."

I started to ask a question and stopped to hear him go on:

"No, sir. It ain't going to happen. Now, we'll do it like this. You stay here in the jail. It's a good jail and you'll be safe here. They is a eastbound train at nine o'clock tonight. Jest after dark. You'll stay right here until a few minutes before nine; then me and Sockeye will take you to the train and you can get out of the country."

He looked at me expectantly, pleased with himself. "You got money enough to buy a ticket?"

"Yes. But what the hell?"

He spoke reprovingly. "Now don't start talking. I ain't going to have no killing. Me and Sockeye will put you on the train." Then he spoke a little heatedly, as though arguing with some one, "I tell you I ain't going to have no killing."

I sat back down on the cot.

"Now," he said, "what you want for dinner?"

"Did you send for that lawyer?"

He shook his head. "Didn't have time. And now you don't need a lawyer. You're a free man."

"Except," I grinned at him, "for being in jail."

Old Tom Morgan chuckled. "Yeah, except for being in jail."

I asked, "Have you seen Slim? He came to Tucson."

"Which Slim?"

"Slim from the Arrowhead."

He shook his head. "Nope. Ain't seen that Slim. Now what you want for dinner?"

I said, "Oh, hell, I want a planked shad! And be sure it's a Connecticut River Shad."

A reminiscent gleam came into the eyes of the old Arizona Sheriff. He chuckled. "Gawd, I'd plumb forgot about shad." He chuckled again as he turned away. "I'll tell Sockeye you want a planked shad."

CHAPTER XII

SOCKEYE CAME stumping along the corridor. He set a tray down on the floor and opened the cell door. The tray was covered with a red and white checked cloth. I got up, and he put the tray on the cot.

"They didn't have no shad, but I done the best I could. I got you two cans of sardines."

He pulled the cloth off the tray and looked with pride at steak, potatoes, bread and butter, dried apple pie, and a mug of coffee. From a rear pocket he pulled out two cans of sardines.

"You're a good soul, Sockeye." Then I asked him: "Where's my gun? If I'm a free man, why don't I get my gun back?"

"You gets your gun on the train tonight."

I noticed he was not wearing his own belt and gun. "Where is your gun?"

His moon face lit up. "I went in a cell oncet wearing a gun. It took us three weeks to git the man back."

"What did he do?"

Sockeye grinned, entirely without animosity. "He hit me." Going out, he snapped the padlock. "I'll be back after a while and git them dishes," he told me. Then his short legs stumped along the corridor dragging jingling spurs. A door was slammed, and I found that, after all, I was hungry.

I cleaned up the tray and put the two tins of sardines in my pocket. Sockeye came back after a while and got the tray.

He wanted to know what I wanted for supper. I told him I wanted my gun and I wanted to see Slim. He said he would tell Tom Morgan.

The yellow square of sunlight on the floor had moved across toward the right. It would, I supposed, move along and up the right-hand wall and then go out. After that it would be dark and old Tom Morgan and Sockeye would take me to the eastbound train. Well, I supposed that was the way it was. Up at the Arrowhead I had boasted that I would be back and make good my filing on the Arrowhead homestead. Kid talk.

On the cot in the jail in Tucson, Gail Gordon seemed to float above my closed eyes. I was sore and bitter that she should not have trusted me. I thought, To hell with her!

I could mail the relinquishment to her. She might notice the date on the notary seal. That would show her I had signed the relinquishment the day I filed, and before they all jumped on me at the Arrowhead. Perhaps then she would ask me to come back. There was lots of comfort in that idea. I dreamed about that, about riding back to the Arrowhead, very important and very forgiving, and taking her in my arms. It was a nice dream.

Damn the whole outfit! I thought. And to hell with her.

I should be taking the train, going back East. Might as well. Flack undoubtedly intended to have me killed. Then the land would be vacant. Scarface and Whitey. I could see that livid scar across the face of Scarface and hear Whitey's high girlish giggle. Somehow, that high giggle was more frightening than anything else about those killers.

With warmth I thought of Saturnino and his insistence that I was misjudged. I wondered what Slim thought. He had not been at the Arrowhead that last time when the damn' cowpuncher they called Andy Jackson had come out with a rope. I liked good old Footless and snickered aloud at his belief that I was a great gun fighter. I should like to like old

Idaho. I hoped bad luck would meet Fred and Garvey, and then touched wood. You never can tell.

And there was the shapeless Indian woman, Dolores, and her opaque-eyed son Manuel: Manuel who wanted to kill Whitey. I hoped he would. And so I came back to Gail Gordon and could see the heavy black hair framing the sweetly aquiline face and the fathomless blue eyes. Well, to hell with her!

And the old Sheriff Tom Morgan who had never had a man taken away from him and was not going to have a killing. So he and Sockeye would put me aboard the eastbound train and I should go back to New York, to Father and Sister Jane and old Paulson and the old crowd. And into the bank to sit at a desk all the rest of my life. Yeah, to sit at a desk all the rest of my life. To grow old and fat and gray, sitting at a desk.

Startled, I suddenly noticed that the square of yellow sunlight was again kitty-cornered in shape and was high up on the eastern wall. I sat up and wondered if I had been sleeping or dreaming. Probably both. There was a reddish light in the cell from the setting sun.

A door rattled, and I heard mumbled talk. Then spurs clinked, and Sockeye stumped up.

"Where's my gun?"

Sockeye's moon face looked amused. "Here's your supper." He put a tray on the cot. "Better tuck this under your belt. You'll get your gun outside."

I said, "I hope so."

He slammed the cell door and went on down the corridor. He seemed to be in a hurry. Going for his own supper, I thought.

It was nearly dark in the cell when I finished supper. The little window, high in the south wall over the cot, was a square of light with three black bars across it. Beyond the bars the evening sky was suffused with a faint pink. I watched

the light way into the night. One bright star began to glitter, seemed to go out, then brightened.

Nervous, excited, I was walking up and down the cell: three steps one way, three steps back. I thought again of that slick black panther I had seen pacing a cage.

The door at the end of the corridor opened, and I could hear mumbled talk. Then Tom Morgan's voice came clearly: "All right. Bring him out." I recognized Sockeye's stumpy walk. I was waiting by the door when it opened. I started to speak, and Sockeye said, "Don't make no noise."

I walked out toward the front office and heard Sockeye whisper, "Wait."

There was a slit of yellow lamplight under the door. That went out. The door opened; somebody came through, stopped, and fumbled with locking the door. In the black darkness I flattened against the wall. Then I heard Tom Morgan ask, "You all ready, Sockeye?"

"Yeah."

Tom Morgan said, "Here's your gun."

I fumbled around in the darkness until my hand came in contact with the butt of a six-shooter. I said, "Thanks," and brought the hammer to half-cock. Then I opened the little gate and ran the cylinder around letting my finger scrape across the butts of the cartridges. There were six of them.

Tom Morgan said, "It's loaded," and started to walk down the corridor.

At the back door we were wedged all three together. The old Sheriff spoke to me in a low voice.

"You'll walk between me and Sockeye. We'll hang back until the train starts, then we'll go aboard with ye. You can buy your ticket from the conductor."

"What's it all about, anyway?"

He answered: "More'n likely there ain't nothing. I'm jest playing safe."

Sockeye asked, "You killed Panhandle, didn't you?"

I had shoved the six-shooter down into the holster, but now I pulled it out again and carried it in my hand. It seemed like a good idea.

The door swung open, and I shrank a little at the blast of chill night air. The jail had been hot with the sun heat, and the opened door seemed like the door of an icebox. We stood outside and waited for the old Sheriff to lock the door. Then we listened. From away off to the west, faint but clear across the flat roof tops, came a train whistle. I pulled in a deep breath of the sweet night air and started to walk. Tom Morgan said:

"Ain't no hurry. You can hear it a long way in the night."

We walked through a gate in an adobe wall and turned to the left, three abreast in the middle of the dusty road. The sky was crowded with glittering stars—crowded with stars, close at hand and utterly indifferent.

Somewhere a dog barked. A dark shapeless figure came shuffling along the house walls and passed us. We turned a corner and heard, from the adobe on the right, the soft sounds of a guitar and a Mexican voice crooning in Spanish. Lights shone from the windows of a saloon, painted green halfway up. Two men lurched out, stood swaying in the green light, then started weaving and tacking along the road.

Sockeye muttered: "I know 'em. They're all right."

I stumbled against a rail and stepped over the other one. The lights of the station were at the left. The yellow windows and the red light up in the semaphore looked a long way off. We turned toward the lights and heard a sudden burst of noise at our backs as the train came around a curve.

We walked along the white glare of the headlight, our fantastic shadows moving ahead. The great light picked out the squat wooden depot. In white letters on the dull red building shone the word "Tucson." Below the word were the white faces of a group of men, watching the train. They

moved around front onto the splintered planks of the platform.

The bell was clanging, and steam was hissing about the diminishing growl of slowing wheels. We passed behind the depot and walked a little way beyond. There was quite a crowd in front. The rear end of the smoking car was opposite us. Farther along, above the train, I saw, against the sky, the ungainly mass of the water tank.

People were going off and some getting on. There was a shout of welcome, talk, laughter, and an insistent child voice that kept saying, "Mamma. Mamma. Mamma." Men began strolling idly toward us, looking up at the yellow windows of the train. A fat man in shirt sleeves with a dirty handkerchief around his throat stuck his bald head out the car window and said: "Hey! Hey! What place is this?" I didn't hear the answer as Tom Morgan was talking.

"There ye are, son. Climb aboard. And ye better not come back."

I started for the steps. "Thanks. Perhaps I won't."

The steps jerked forward just as I reached them. I grabbed a gritty iron rod and swung up. As I reached the platform I heard a high, shrill yell: "There he is! There he is!"

I walked quickly across the platform and met a brakeman coming up the other steps. He gulped, "Hey!" His face looked white, and he acted as if he was going to put his hands up. Then I realized I still was carrying the six-shooter in my hand. "It's all right," I yelled at the brakeman, and laughed.

I shall never know why I made the next move. I did not think of it in advance. I am sure I did not. Without thinking I simply shoved past the startled brakeman, faced toward the engine, and jumped.

I lit running, stamped into a pool of water and came up against a square timber. A slow drip from the water tank ran down the back of my neck. I moved around the heavy timber

and flattened against it. Back at the depot the crowd was breaking up and drifting away. I remembered the high thin yell, "There he is! There he is!" and thought of Whitey.

A red light was rumbling away to the east, and I watched it fade away. The train was gone, and I began to wish I had gone with it.

It seemed a good idea to wait until everyone had left the depot. Wait and see if any one knew I had jumped from the train, or cared.

Then I was frozen stiff at the sound of a voice directly behind me. The spasm of sheer fright gave way to a great relief. The voice was a cool, amused drawl: "My! My! The great cowman." After a minute the voice added, "From New York."

Then spurs clanked, and I heard Saturnino. "But, Petey," he was saying, "why do you stand in the rain?"

With a gasp of delight I moved out from under the drip. I wanted to hug them. I wanted to laugh and cry and yell. And I wanted to ask a thousand questions. But Slim was asking, "Did you see them go, Sat?"

Saturnino answered, "They take their horses and ride down the street."

I asked, "Who?"

In the darkness I knew Slim was grinning at me. "Your little playmates, Scarface and Whitey."

"What were they doing?" I asked.

Slim went on: "I was right surprised Whitey didn't take a shot. Mebbeso even Whitey was afraid to shoot wild thataway into a crowd."

"And besides," Saturnino said, "I have the gun on Mister Whitey all the time."

Slim said, "Yeah, but did Whitey know it?"

Saturnino shrugged.

I asked, "But what is it all about? Why are you here? What is going on?"

Slim said: "Let's git away from this place. I never did like water."

We moved away in the darkness and came to three saddled horses, standing patiently in the darkness with reins dropped to the ground. Slim banded the loose ends of a pair of reins, saying, "Walking ain't good for you; too slow."

I felt a rifle in the scabbard under the stirrup fender. The whole saddle seemed faintly familiar. I said, "Why, it's my saddle!"

Saturnino chuckled, "But of course. I bring it down on a led horse."

"But the horses are fresh," I said.

Slim muttered, "The Arrowhead's got horses all over." Then they were up in their saddles, and I slid up into mine. I stretched my legs down into the stirrups and was happy.

"But how do you come to be here?" I asked. "What's going on?"

Slim pulled his horse over close to mine. He said, "Shut up." Then he added in a low, moody voice, "Saturnino brought orders down from the ranch to bring you back."

"Bring me back!" I exclaimed. I waited, thinking. I think my voice croaked a little then. "Whose orders?"

Slim said, "Gail."

Even in the darkness I could see the flash of Saturnino's white teeth, "But yes," he said. "If you are in the Tucson then Slim and me are to bring you to the ranch."

Slim's moody voice broke in. "And don't think you ain't going, feller."

I sensed a subcurrent of antagonism in Slim. Slim, I felt sure, did not altogether trust me. That, I was sure, would come out right before long.

I asked, "But you saw me coming to the train with old Tom Morgan and Sockeye—"

"Yeah, we saw you. But we figured if you wanted to quit the country that was your business." After a minute Slim

added, "And don't forget Saturnino held a gun on Whitey while you was making your getaway."

Then Saturnino gave Slim a resounding whack on the back—a whack that brought dust out of Slim's shirt. The horses snorted, and Slim cursed. Saturnino whispered, hilariously, "And, Mister Slim, when Petey climb aboard the train I offer you the bet of one hundred dollars that he come off again! Did you bet, Slim? Did you make the bet?"

Slim said: "Shut up. And listen."

We listened, but I could hear nothing. Nothing, that is, that seemed to me of any importance. There was a running horse somewhere; some dogs barked, faintly; over in town somebody yelled; and, by some quirk in the wind, the rumble of the train came back with sudden intensity and then was cut off as though a door had closed.

I said, "They don't know I got off the train."

Slim was not listening to me. He asked Saturnino, "Was Scarface with Whitey?"

Saturnino shook his huge hat. "I do not see him." Then in a troubled voice he asked, "What you think, Slim?"

"We better pull our freight."

Slim and Saturnino kicked up their horses, and I followed them. Shod hoofs clicked on the rails as we crossed the track. We turned right, toward the yellow windows in the end of the depot. A cool, thin wind was setting down from the mountains around town. I started to button up my coat, then was afraid the coat would cover up the butt of my six-shooter.

We rode at a walk, nearly noiseless in the dust, listening to subdued, confused night noises from town. The velvety purple sky was filled with stars that glittered so close at hand. Suddenly a man burst out the door of the depot. He was yelling wildly.

It was the agent, still wearing a green eyeshade and black cloth sleeve protectors, and waving a slip of paper. "Holdup!" he yelled. "Holdup! Train holdup!"

He burst into the middle of the road, running madly toward town, waving the paper, and yelling at every jump, "Holdup!"

I kicked my horse and said, "Come on."

Slim reached over, grabbed my reins, and yanked my horse to a plunging stop. He hissed at me, "Shut up! And listen."

We sat our horses there in the darkness. The running, yelling agent had made the horses nervous. They shifted around and snorted. Saturnino said, musingly: "The Scarface one, Slim. He is not with charming Whitey."

I could see Slim nod. Then he started his horse up at a walk, telling us, "We better know what's up." To me he added, "You, Petey, keep back outa sight, and keep your mouth shut."

Slim and Saturnino rode together, whispering. I dropped behind and tried to hear what they were saying, but couldn't. Then I was thinking about Scarface and Whitey, and what Saturnino had said. Abruptly, the thought came that perhaps Scarface had held up the train looking for me. Icy fear ran up and down my back. Those men, I thought, were horrible. As ruthless and as persistent as northern cold, they would stop at nothing.

Light shone from the old Sheriff's office. A lantern bobbed around, lighting up the legs of horses and men. As we walked our horses forward, several more men came up on running horses—talking excitedly, laughing, pleased. I thought, bitterly, of the other morning when men who knew nothing about me had hunted me—hunted and tried to kill me just because they could. I felt a quick sympathy with the man who had held up the train.

I pulled up the horse to listen as Slim asked, "What's up, Tom? Having a party?"

Old Tom Morgan asked sharply, "Who's that?" Then he spoke cordially. "By God, Slim, I'm glad you're here! And

Saturnino. Good!" Then he peered beyond and asked, "Who's that with you?"

Slim looked at me in the darkness, then turned back to Tom Morgan, speaking casually, "Jest one of the Arrowhead boys."

Tom Morgan said again, "Good. I'll swear you in as we ride."

Slim asked again, "But what's up?"

Tom Morgan spoke impatiently. "How many we got, Sockeye?"

In the darkness I heard Sockeye mumbling. Then he said aloud, "Ten, Tom. Ten."

Tom Morgan climbed onto the big gray horse as Slim asked again, sharply:

"But what the hell's going on?"

"Holdup, Slim. Holdup. Train holdup out at the cut."

"Who done it?"

Old Tom Morgan picked up his reins and spoke bitterly. "What the hell's his name. You know, that damn pup who killed Panhandle."

The Sheriff seemed to be fumbling for a name. He went on bitterly: "And me giving him his gun back and helping him to git out of town. You know his name—that damn killer who killed Panhandle. Oh, yes—Stirling. Peter Stirling." Kicking at the big gray, he called out: "Come on, boys. Git going."

I held my head down as the men swarmed past. Some of them brushed me as they went. I looked up and saw Slim and Saturnino still sitting their horses in the yellow lamplight from the Sheriff's window.

Suddenly Saturnino doubled up and began to laugh. He held onto the saddle horn with both hands and rocked and shrieked with laughter.

After a while Slim spoke coldly. "Yeah. Funny, ain't it? Right damn funny."

Then Slim began to laugh too. They were pounding each other's backs and yelling with laughter. But I could see nothing to laugh at.

Saturnino pulled his horse around and came close to me. I could see his white teeth flashing. "Petey," he chortled, "Petey, the gunman, the horse thief, and now the train robber!" He went off again into a gale of laughter.

Slim had sobered up and spoke curtly. "Shut up, Sat. We got to git out of here."

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"The Arrowhead."

Saturnino asked, "What you think, Slim—by the mountain trail?"

"Naw, we'll go up the river. And we'll start right now."

We rode abreast down the dusty street between the solid walls of the one-story, flat-roofed adobes. The horses made soft padding noises in the dust. I noticed the new moon now. It was no larger than the last time. It was shocking to remember that it was only last night—it was only last night that Tom Morgan and Sockeye had brought me down from Sacaton City on the stage.

Occasionally yellow light gleamed from dusty windows in the houses. A small dog ran out and barked furiously. An open door showed a small fire flickering in a fireplace. A baby began querulous squalling. Two men on horseback turned the corner and rode toward us. One of them asked, "That you, Hank?" Slim said, "Naw." They rode on into the darkness, saddles creaking and bit chains rattling. The slim lemon-peel moon was going directly at the end of the street. It was early yet.

We turned a corner, and I recognized the place where Flack had stood and yelled: "Horse thief! Kill him! Kill him!" Damn Flack!

I said, "I'd like to have that big bay horse."

Saturnino laughed. "But, Petey, you have the other things to make the think about."

I asked, "Why does old Tom Morgan think I held up the train?"

That set them to laughing again. Slim said: "My! My! Old Tom is sure in a rage. He'll never hear the last of it. He protects you from Flack's killers, puts you on the train, gives you your gun and his blessing—then you holds up the train. Oh, my, my!"

"Shut up," I snarled at him. "I don't see anything funny about it. Now he will shoot me on sight."

Slim chuckled, "He sure will."

"Why does he think I did it? Who did it?"

Slim said, "Tom was jumping at things when he said you did it. It seemed the natural thing to him. So he concluded you did. You see," he went on, "you got a mean reputation."

"Oh, hell!" Then I asked, "You have any idea who did?"

Slim said, "Jest a guess."

I saw Saturnino nodding his huge hat. "But of course. The Scarface."

Slim said, "Yeah, I figure it that away."

For a while there was nothing but the soft padding of the walking horses, the creak of leather, and far off the crazy laughter of a coyote. We were out of the flat beyond the last houses. I looked away to the left toward the old Mission, but there was nothing but low-hanging stars.

Slim spoke thoughtfully. "I figure it, Whitey was to look after you, if you didn't go on the train. Scarface was on the train, and as soon as they got a ways out he went through the train with a gun looking for you. Probably weren't no hold-up, jest a man with a scar over his face and a gun in his hand hunting through the train. Looked like a holdup, so they yelled, 'Holdup.' Mebbeso he did hold 'em up enough to make 'em stop so he could git off."

Saturnino said, "I think you make the good guess, Slim. That is the way it would be."

I asked, "And now what?"

Slim spoke quietly. "Well, Flack has declared open war. You have filed on the Arrowhead. Flack wants you dead. And he's going to turn all hell loose to make it that way."

CHAPTER XIII

So SLIM, Saturnino, and I rode out of Tucson in the darkness of that July night. We crossed the mesa and dropped down into the valley of the Rio Sacaton. And I wondered again at what seemed to me the strange temperature shifts of the high desert. Searing in the daytime and then a bitter chill at night.

I thought of the Arrowhead, of Gail Gordon, of old Idaho, of Fred and Footless and Garvey, of Dolores and the opaque-eyed Indian lad Manuel—Manuel who wanted to kill Whitey. I shivered a little at the thought of Whitey. Whitey with his high, silly giggle seemed to me something inhuman, beastly, and infinitely dangerous. I was afraid.

And I thought of the east half of Section 9 and the filing papers in my belt. And the relinquishment I had signed, turning it over to Gail Gordon. I grew bitter again because the people of the Arrowhead took it for granted that I was trying to steal the home of Gail Gordon. To hell with them!

And now Flack had come out into the open, and it was war. I wondered why Gail Gordon had sent for me. Not, I

told myself, because she wanted me. Probably they wanted me where they could lay their hands on me. If I was dead, then anybody could file. And so Flack would do anything, everything, to have me killed. And the Arrowhead? I couldn't believe that Gail Gordon could be a party to anything like that.

I spoke aloud. "What if I don't choose to go to the Arrowhead?"

Slim answered, coolly enough, "You'll go there jest the same."

Saturnino put in: "But, Petey, it is the better way to do. You make the trust in me and Slim."

I said, "Flack killed Joe."

Slim asked, "How do you know?"

"I didn't see it done, but Flack was there. He could have been there long before I was. Joe found out about the section corner and told Flack. Probably told it as a casual piece of news. Flack didn't want it known yet. So he killed Joe."

"It could 'a' been." After a minute Slim added, "But that ain't important now."

"What is important?"

Slim shrugged as he answered, "You."

"Thank you so much." Then I asked, "What will Flack and his gang do now?"

"If we doped it right and it was Scarface holding up the train looking for you—" He stopped talking and seemed to be thinking it over. Then he drawled, "More'n likely they'll take Tucson apart tonight and shake it upside down." He went on with more confidence, "Sure they'll look for you in Tucson."

"They won't think of me at the Arrowhead," I said.

Saturnino spoke, "But yes. That is it. Mister Flack, he saw Slim and me in Tucson this afternoon. Tomorrow he does not see us. He say, 'Ha. The Arrowhead.' Then the Scarface and Mister Whitey come quick."

I shivered again at the mention of Whitey. For some strange reason I had no particular fear of Scarface—no more than the healthy fear of a tenderfoot for a proven killer. But Whitey was another matter.

Saturnino said, "It was bad. Very bad."

"What?" I asked.

"That the Flack man see us today. Tomorrow we gone, Petey gone, so Flack hunt the Arrowhead."

Slim chuckled. "And don't forget Tom Morgan. He'll have boils on his seat. Him and his posse will shoot Petey on sight."

I said, "I guess I'll go to the Arrowhead."

They both laughed, but I couldn't see anything to laugh at. I asked, "What's the end of the business?"

Slim answered. "Kill Flack."

His casual, but final, tone shocked me. But, after all, what else was there? Flack was out to kill—would have me rubbed out like a pencil mark on paper. I could give Flack a relinquishment, or I could get killed. It was as simple as that. I had been a damn' fool not to stay on the train. And then I remembered Scarface.

But if Flack knew I had already signed a relinquishment in favor of Gail Gordon? I thought that over. My mind went round and round, trying to avoid the only possible conclusion. Flack would have Gail Gordon killed. I asked, "Would Flack kill a woman?"

In the starlight I could see Slim shrug. "So," he asked, "you have trailed that down?"

"What a hell of a country!" Then I complained, "I came here to learn the cow business."

Slim chuckled, and Saturnino laughed. Saturnino said, "But, Petey, you learn the first lesson very, very quick."

"What's that?" I asked.

It was Slim who answered, "To stay alive."

We rode past the stage station with only barking dogs to

notice us. Later in the night we heard the clanking roll of the stage coming down, and we rode out into the mesquite to let it pass. The east turned faintly white and faded away. Then a great streamer of rose light shot away up into the heavens, flickered and went out, and came again, growing stronger and brighter. Before I realized that the dawn had come, I could see the faces of Slim and Saturnino.

I was glad to see Saturnino's flashing white teeth, slim black mustache and dark, liquid eyes. And it was good to see the burned-leather face of Slim with the blue eyes and the slow, friendly grin.

"I have missed the place again," I told them.

"What place?" Slim asked.

"Where I hid my chaps that night," I told him.

We crossed the bridge into Sacaton City just at sunrise. And the instant the sun cleared the heights to the east it was hot.

"Look," I told them, "there's Footless's buckboard."

"So 'tis," Slim said. Then he said, "Let's eat. I'm all gaunted up."

We left our horses in the stable. The man there gave me a funny look. Plodding up the dusty street toward the restaurant of the Chinaman, I remembered the evening when Tom Morgan and Sockeye had bundled me into the stage and a group of men stood around telling one another, "Yeah, he killed Panhandle."

That seemed years and years ago, but it was only night before last. I could not get used to thinking everything that had happened since I came to Sacaton City had been a long time ago. I asked, "What day is it?"

Slim said, "Damfino. What day was it yesterday, Sat?"

"The day is Tuesday, but I do not know is it this Tuesday or last Tuesday. Why?"

I said, "Good God. It was only a week ago yesterday I rode up to the Arrowhead. It seems like a million years ago."

We ate breakfast and came out into the hot sun picking our teeth. Slim said, "And I give three guesses where we find Footless."

Nobody guessed, and we crossed the street to the Palace Saloon. It was cool and shady in there, smelling of whisky and stale beer. Fat, the barkeep, spoke heartily, "Hi, Slim. How, Don Saturnino? And how's Peter Stirling?"

Propped against the bar, Footless looked at us over his shoulder and asked, "Hunh?"

I felt, somehow, at home. This was Arrowhead country. Fat put his big white hand across the bar to shake with me. He asked, "Have a good time in Tucson?"

"Fine."

Footless asked, "Hunh? You killed Whitey yet?"

Slim spoke reprovingly. "Now, now, Footless, that ain't polite. I'm plumb ashamed of you."

Footless said, "Hunh?" and then asked, "Hey, Fat, where'd that bottle take itse'f to?"

Fat put out the glasses and did his favorite trick of sliding a bottle of whisky the length of the bar to come to rest directly in front of me.

I poured a drink, said "How," and lifted it. Then I held the glass suspended in front of my face, listening. In the mirror behind the bar I saw Slim set his glass back. Saturnino was twirling his glass between his fingers, his head cocked to listen. Footless poured his drink down quickly, blinked, shivered, and asked, "Who's them?"

Slim turned his face to look at me and grinned. "My, my! I reckon the law done caught up with you."

The sound was clear now—running horses, a lot of them. They came to a plunging stop outside the place. Men spoke and cursed, saddle leather creaked and spurred boots rattled on the board platform. I looked hurriedly around the Palace, at the windows and at the back door, then turned to look at old Tom Morgan coming in the front.

And then I heard that horrible sound: the high girlish giggle of Whitey. Icy fear ran up and down my spine. I don't know what it was about that giggle. Scarface and Panhandle were experienced and ruthless gunfighters but they did not fill me with abject fear. Whitey did.

Tom Morgan strode into the Palace. His old face was drawn and haggard with a sleepless night of hard riding. I wondered who, in spite of Slim's precautions, had told him we were on our way to Sacaton City.

Old Tom leveled a long finger at me. He said, "I want you."

Then I made the tactical error of looking over my shoulder at a sudden movement behind me. Fat had fished out that double-barreled sawed-off shotgun. With both hammers at full cock he was cradling it in his big white hands across the bar. I noticed even that he had two fingers inside the trigger guard, a finger on each trigger.

I looked back at Tom Morgan and heard Fat's mild, genial voice. He said, "Take your hand off your gun, Scarface."

Then I saw the livid scar that ran across the face of Scarface. He was hanging back in the outer edge of the group of men, the Sheriff's posse, that crowded in behind Tom Morgan. Scarface took his hand off his gun.

I looked at the men crowding in behind Tom Morgan. I tried to count them and then gave it up. A dozen or so. A dozen or so of a sheriff's posse on a hunt for me. Suddenly I hated them.

Men who knew nothing at all about me. Knew nothing at all about what I had done or not done. Simply the hue and cry had been raised, and they grabbed their guns and horses and rode out on a man hunt. They neither knew nor cared what it was all about. They saw the chance to hunt and kill a man. I wished Fat would twitch his two fingers and fill the Palace Saloon with buckshot.

Tom Morgan came on toward us, and the men spread out

in a fan behind him. Then I heard Slim's cool drawl, "What's on your mind; Tom?"

The old Sheriff said, "I'll have to take him, Slim."

Slim grinned and drawled, "You ain't forgetting, be you, Tom, that this is Arrowhead country?"

I think it was then that I first grasped the power and prestige of the Arrowhead. I remembered Idaho telling Tom Morgan, "Your writs don't run to the Arrowhead."

With my New York and Long Island youth, raised in complete conformity with any and all laws, it was something of a shock to my conventional mind. But I warmed to it.

I heard Slim ask, "What for?"

Tom Morgan's cold gray eyes held me as he answered Slim, "For train robbery."

Slim shook his head, slowly but quite finally. "Sorry, Tom, but he didn't do it."

Then I heard again that high girlish giggle. The horrid sound seemed to start some sort of wave that rustled through the men in the room. Some looked over their shoulders, then quickly turned back to look at me.

Slim was on my right, one high heel hooked over the rail and both elbows on the bar behind him. Completely relaxed. Quite casual. On my left Saturnino was leaning idly back against the bar, his hands at his sides. Beyond him I could see that Footless had hooked his wooden peg inside the rail. Beyond Footless was the white-shirted figure of Fat, cuddling his double-barreled shotgun with both hammers at full cock.

I heard Slim say: "You're all wrong, Tom. He didn't do it."

A voice from the crowd snarled, "Yeah?"

Slim went on in a cool drawling voice. "You remember last night, Tom, when you was getting your posse? You told me and Sat to come along, and you asked who was it behind me? And I says it's one of the Arrowhead boys." Slim paused then and gave them a chance to see the night before and

my dim figure in the background. Then he jerked his head toward me and said, "That was Petey." Then he added, with a grin, "Peter Stirling, of New York."

I had heard the word "flabbergasted," but I had never before seen it in operation. And the curious thing about it was that no one questioned Slim's word.

I began, at last, to sense the man that was called "Slim." He stood there, quite casual, with his elbows hooked on the bar behind him. "So you see," he said, "it couldn't 'a' been Petey."

The complete acceptance of Slim's word by everybody in the room astonished me. A faint sigh went through the crowd, a sigh of relief, of letdown. I sensed, abruptly, that these men who were out on a gala picnic, a man hunt, were suddenly enormously relieved that they did not have to face the spitting guns of the Arrowhead.

Tom Morgan spoke in a voice that was now very tired. "Well, Slim, you ain't never lied to nobody yet." That seemed to settle the matter as far as I was concerned.

Then Slim asked, "This holdup party—was he robbing people, or was he looking for somebody?"

Tom Morgan scratched the white bristle on his jaw. "Well now, Slim, come to think of it, he must 'a' been looking for somebody. He looked everybody over careful until he got to the last car. The sleeper. Then he began robbing everybody. Now you bring it up, Slim, mebbeso he was looking for somebody, not for loot."

Men began looking at one another, nodding their heads. You could see them thinking that was it. The man had been looking for somebody, then at the last car, the sleeper, he had concluded he might as well make something out of it.

The Sheriff, old Tom Morgan, shook his head as though to rid it of cobwebs. With the voice of a tired old man he said, "Damn if I know what it's all about, Slim. There's something back of the whole business."

Slim said, "I'll tell you the whole business, Tom." He seemed to hesitate a minute to gather his facts. Then Slim went on: "The Arrowhead is on the east half of Section 9. But when old J. G., Gail's father, proved up, that damned crooked Land Office gave him a patent on the east half of Section 19. Down on the flats. Down on that alkali desert."

The room was very still then. You could see ears pricking up. You could see them thinking, So the Arrowhead is vacant land, and you could see their furtive glances at one another. You could see they were figuring on how that might affect them personally.

Then again we heard that ghostly high-pitched giggle.

Slim ignored the giggle and jerked his head at me again. "Petey here," he went on, "found it out some way and filed on it."

You could recognize a long-drawn shudder of disappointment in the crowd. You could see them telling themselves that they couldn't file on the Arrowhead.

I listened to Slim. "So you see, Tom, we're taking Petey to the Arrowhead. Were seeing that Petey makes his residence, lives there, and proves up when the time comes."

It seemed a long, long time before Slim went on. He grinned his slow grin as he told Tom Morgan, "So you see, Petey stays on the Arrowhead."

And I felt a welling up of bitterness. So, I thought, that was it. She didn't send them after me because she wanted me. She sent them after me on account of the ranch. I simply didn't count as an individual.

I think that then I knew the bottom of human hopes. I think that then I grew into an old, old man. When Slim had said she had sent them to bring me back to the Arrowhead; I had built a long, long dream of love. I had believed she wanted me. Me. Wanted me back at the Arrowhead.

In the fog of my bitterness I heard Slim say, "Let's drink. Set 'em up, Fat."

Spurs rattled, and suddenly the room was full of relief and of men moving up to the bar.

Then Slim said, "But I ain't buying for Scarface nor Whitey."

Again we heard that high giggle, and my knees knocked together. I propped my legs back against the bar and half yelled at old Tom Morgan, "It was Scarface that held up the train!"

There was an appalling quiet after that. Men who were surging forward toward the bar stopped in their tracks. They turned uncertain heads to look at one another, then looked back over their shoulders at the man they called "Scarface."

I guess I went completely mad. I yelled out again, "It was Scarface. Why don't you search him?"

I heard Slim hiss, "You damn fool—" and Saturnino on my left laughed gayly. Then I was tugging at my six-shooter. I saw Scarface sweep down to the butt of his six-shooter, and I kept on tugging at my own gun. It seemed that I would never get it out. I think it took years for me to tug out my six-shooter. Then I sensed a quick movement at my left. Saturnino. I forgot my six-shooter and watched a streak of light passing across the room.

The streak of light turned over, turned over twice, quite lazily. I think that was what appalled me. It seemed to take years and years for that streak of light to cross the room. It turned over and over, glinting in the light.

Then I saw Scarface stumble back against the roulette table. He gave an agonized "Ah-h," and I shall hear it until I die.

Scarface had dropped his six-shooter on the floor and was grasping with both hands at the handle of the knife sticking out of his throat.

We were, I guess, all paralyzed as we stood there and watched Scarface die.

I whirled around to the bar and yelled at Fat, "For God's sake, give me a drink."

I heard Slim say, "Clever work, Sat, clever work."

Then Footless spoke up. "Hunh! Sat didn't need to throw the knife. Petey would 'a' got him with his gun."

Then Saturnino and Slim began to laugh. They laughed and laughed. Saturnino beat me on the back until it hurt, yelling, "Sure, sure, Petey would have got him."

Well, I had a friendly feeling for Footless, who thought I was a great gunman. But I was glad that Slim and Saturnino knew better.

Then I heard that shrill girlish laugh again. In spite of the heat and the whisky I shivered.

I had known Whitey had come in with the Sheriff's posse and I had carefully kept my eyes away from him. I could see him now, see his whitish hair and eyebrows over the shoulder of a short heavy man. His eyes were light, light and expressionless.

I heard Slim drawl, "Nice posse you got, Tom."

Old Tom Morgan protested: "They ain't in my posse. They just come along."

Slim grinned. "My, my! They jest come along." Then he added, "And mebbeso they'll jest go along."

Whitey giggled again, and somebody said, "Scarface won't."

Slim said, "My, my! Let's weep for Scarface." Then he told the Sheriff, "Don't let us keep you, Tom."

"You ain't keeping me," the old Sheriff said. "Slim, I'm right sorry at this whole play. I was wrong, and I know it."

Slim spoke in a friendly voice. "That's all right, Tom."

Tom Morgan said, "Well, boys, let's be getting back."

The posse moved in a body toward the door. Slim gave a slight hiss, and I sensed the tenseness of Saturnino and the barkeep. Footless grunted, "Hunh," and I saw that now he had his gun in his hand.

Mumbling voices, a laugh, the rattle of spurs, and the rasp of chaps filled the room as the posse moved toward the door. I watched their dusty backs and blinked at the sunlight as the door was pushed open and held while they went out. I did not see Whitey.

There was more talk from out front, the creak of saddle leather, a sharp curse and the snort of tired horses. Then there was the steady sound of many horses plodding down the dusty street. The sound grew dim and was gone.

Saturnino slid up to the door, opened it a crack, and peered out. He came back, flashing his white teeth in a gay smile. "The sweet Whitey," he said, "goes along."

I heard a faint sigh of relief from Fat, the barkeep. He was carefully letting down the hammers of a sawed-off double-barreled shotgun.

Slim said, "You're right bloodthirsty, Fat."

Fat shook his head quite seriously. "No, Slim. Jest cautious."

Slim asked a question by jerking his head back toward the dead Scarface.

Fat said, "It ain't nothing. The swamper will look after it. I guess they is room for another on Boot Hill."

Fat went to the back door and yelled, "Torres!" and then a string of Spanish.

Slim said, "Let's travel." Over his shoulder he called to Fat, "Watch yourse'f, Fat."

The four of us stepped out into the heat and the glare and blinked at the white-hot sun. The Sheriff's posse had gone, and the one street of Sacaton City was empty and dead.

The four of us walked abreast down the street, our feet raising a little cloud of white dust that hung in the air. On the left, a man with a rifle in the crook of his arm came to the door, jerked his thumb down the street, and nodded his head. Slim nodded, and the man went back in the house.

Slim said, "They pulled their freight," and I again realized

that this was Arrowhead country. And then I felt very bad as I realized it had nothing to do with me. I was only a prisoner of the Arrowhead.

CHAPTER XIV

THE PLANKS rattled as we crossed the bridge over the dry wash. Little spurts of dust came up from the cracks. The sun burned our backs. Then we came to the forks in the road. The fork in the road.

My horse stopped of his own accord. Probably he sensed I wanted to stop. The road to the left was the road to Tucson. Tucson and the railroad and New York. I thought of Dad and Sister Jane and of the cool office in the bank. Safe there. Oh, quite safe.

The right-hand fork led to the Arrowhead. To the Arrowhead, to the high peaks of the Sacaton Range, to the bright stream of sparkling water that came out from under the great hills. And it led to Gail Gordon.

I told myself. To hell with Gail Gordon.

Saturnino and Slim had pulled up their horses and were looking at me over their shoulders. I saw Slim's slow grin and heard him drawl, "Yeah, the forks in the road. But you ain't got no choice."

I snarled, "The hell I haven't." But I knew quite well that was grandstand talk. I had no choice. And it was not because of Slim and Saturnino.

I kicked up my horse and he jumped in between them,

then slowed to a walk. Saturnino was looking at the dusty road in front of the horses. He nodded his head and spoke to Slim, "Mister Whitey goes with the posse, I think."

Slim nodded. "Yeah, going to report. Mebbeso going for help."

"Help for what?" I asked.

Slim's slow grin came around to me, "To do what Saturnino spiked back there in the Palace."

Slim grinned at Saturnino and spoke with admiration. "They had it fixed right pretty. Scarface was to get Petey and then dodge behind Tom Morgan's posse so we couldn't get at him. He would go on out the door while Whitey covered him. By the time we could 'a' got a shot at Whitey, Scarface would 'a' had the horses ready. It was right clever."

He finished up: "But they didn't figure on your knife, Sat. They was ready for a gunplay, but you plumb surprised 'em."

I began now to understand what had gone on back there in the Palace Saloon. I said, "I suppose I owe you something, Saturnino."

Saturnino's white teeth flashed. "It is the no matter, Petey." Then, as if wanting to change the subject, he gave me a whack on the back and asked, "But, Petey, how is it you like the cow business by this time?"

I grinned at Saturnino. "It is a very nice business. I like it a lot. Since I went into the cow business I have been accused of murder. I have dug a grave and cleaned out a ditch. I have had to kill a man. I have been shot at by total strangers and jailed for horse stealing. They wanted to arrest me for train robbery, and a man named Andy Jackson got out a rope to hang me. Now I'm being taken to the Arrowhead, and I suppose up there you will scalp and burn me at the stake—but I haven't yet seen one damn' cow."

They thought that was funny. They laughed and laughed. After a while Slim said, "Mebbeso scalp, but we wouldn't burn you, Petey."

"Thank you so much."

The road turned and twisted and wound away up the long brown slopes. Up through the sage and greasewood and into the parklike region of the live oaks. Away off below lay the desert with the patches of leprous looking alkali, and beyond were the naked mountains of old Mexico.

We crossed the great ribs of the Sacaton Range and wound down into dry washes where the horses' feet were muted in dry sand. Then from behind we heard a wild yell and turned tense and still to look.

There was another wild yell, the rattle of a buckboard, and Footless came down the grade with the half-wild buckskins in a wild run. The supplies in the buckboard were covered with a tarp and lashed down with a rope. The buckskins had their black ears laid back in anger. Footlegg had his peg leg stuck into the can; the other foot rode the brake, and he lashed at the ponies with the loose ends of the reins. He swept past us with a gleeful "Whee!" and lashed the buckskins forward.

Saturnino waved his huge hat and yelled. "Whee!" and his horse put his head down between his knees and went into a savage buck.

Slim said, "Damn' crazy fool."

Saturnino yanked his horse's head up and came trotting back to us, laughing. He said, "I think the good Footless take a drink perhaps."

Slim said, "I think he drank a barrel."

We went on, up the long slopes and over the hills, crossing the dry washes, getting higher and higher into the foothills. The fantastic juniper forests came down to meet us, their hot acrid smell coming strong to our nostrils. A few lonely pines were along the washes, as though the forests of the higher hills had sent down a few scouts to spy out the land.

"Now look," I asked. "What you going to do? What do you expect to get out of me?"

Slim grinned—grinned quite amiably; but I sensed something implacable even in his friendly grin. "That," he said, "is for Idaho to say."

I said, "Well, you know now that Flack killed Joe."

Slim said, "Well—we know Flack is back of what's going on. And we know Flack wants to get his hands on you. So we jest beat him to it."

I thought that over awhile and thought of the papers in my belt. I said: "Now look. If anything happens to me there are some papers in my belt."

Slim gave me a swift look and nodded. Saturnino flashed his white teeth, then gave me a resounding whack on the back. "But, Petey," he said, "nothing is to happen." But Slim said nothing.

Before I knew it we had topped the last rise, and the incredible green of the alfalfa field lay below us. Beyond that the little river ran joyously, sparkling in the sun. I looked away off down to the right, and thought of the death of that bright stream in the murderous alkali.

To the left was the cottonwood grove, dusty leaves hanging straight and still. Beyond the green of the trees the main ranch house of the Arrowhead glittered white in the sun. To my annoyance my heart began to pound. I told myself, To hell with her.

Tired horses smelled water and horse and snorted with jaded impatience. We went on down the grade and turned into the cool green tunnel under the cottonwoods. Water murmured in a little ditch among the trees. I thought, I'll never waste water again.

The white house threw back the sun with almost unbearable intensity. The row of hollyhocks flamed bravely in that alien land. I kept my eyes away from the windows.

We unsaddled down at the corrals. The buckskin team

Footless had driven had black streaks of sweat and were too tired to turn their heads and look at us. Slim said, "Damn that Footless."

Our spurs rattled as we walked up toward the bunkhouse. Rattling spurs and the soft swish of the chaps of Saturnino and Slim. In front of the bunkhouse stood old Idaho.

It seemed to be all happening over again. The tall old man with his hands shoved flat down inside his gun belt was teetering back and forth on his high heels. His frosty gray eyes flickered with amusement. "Well, bub," he asked, "what's on your mind?"

Saturnino laughed, and Slim flipped a hand at me, saying, "Yeah. Mr. Peter Stirling—of New York."

Old Idaho took a hand out of his belt to pull at one side of his sweeping white mustache. "Glad to see you, bub. Glad to see you."

Fred came to the door of the bunkhouse. He didn't have to tip his head back to look down at me. He grunted, "You, is it?"

I asked Fred, "How's your bellyache? Not that I give a damn."

Saturnino laughed. Fred grunted, "Bad," and went back into the bunkhouse.

Garvey came around the corner, stopped and looked at me, spat contemptuously, and climbed up the two steps after Fred. I wondered how Garvey always kept a week-old dirty red patchy beard on his unpleasant face.

I turned to the watchful eyes of Idaho and snarled at him, "Well, you got me here. Now what you going to do about it?"

He spoke soothingly. "Thought you'd be safer here, bub. Thought you'd be safer here."

I was going to answer hotly, childishly, but the air was filled with the wild clangor of Footless beating on the wagon tire. He ended up with a "Whee!"

Fred came out and complained, "That damn' Footless is drunk again."

Old Idaho chuckled. Then he said, mildly, "Well, after all. Footless don't git much fun out of life."

Fred snorted, "Humph," and stalked away toward the cookhouse. We all drifted along after him. Manuel, the Indian lad, came on silent feet out of nowhere and walked beside him. His dark opaque eyes looked at me, and I thought I detected, for an instant, a warm friendly glow. Then they went blank again.

As usual, the men came to the table to eat, not to talk. Footless seemed subdued now and stumped around. A door opened behind me and my heart suddenly began to pound so hard I thought everybody could hear it. A chunk of beefsteak stuck in my throat, and I hid my red face in the plate.

But it was only Dolores, mother of Manuel. She sniffed at the pots and pans, filled some dishes, and carried them away on a tray. I gulped to swallow the half-chewed beef.

On the way back to the bunkhouse my eyes searched the windows of the main house. I wanted to ask somebody about Gail Gordon and tried to think of some casual question. I wondered if she had gone away.

Old Idaho said, "Slim tells me Flack offered you five hundred dollars to sign a relinquishment?"

"Yes."

Idaho chuckled. "If he had intended to buy, he would have offered some real money."

"What did he intend?"

"Well now," Idaho drawled, "a forty-five slug don't cost much."

"So you thought of that too?" I asked.

Idaho was quite amiable. "Oh, yes, it did occur to us."

"Where's your gang?" I asked.

His gray eyes opened a little. "Gang? What gang?" Then

he chuckled. "Oh, you mean the boys. They're out in camp, chasing them worry horns out of the juniper breaks."

"Go on," I said, "tell me some more about a forty-five lead slug."

Idaho seemed amused. He shook his head in a reproving manner. "The Arrowhead don't do business that way. Now it's like this. We're prepared to offer you five thousand. Cash."

I was bitter about the whole thing. If they had trusted me! It was curious, it occurred to me, that I felt no bitterness toward Flack and his killers. You would feel no personal bitterness toward a wolf. You expected a wolf to be a wolf, and you killed it if you could. But the Arrowhead. The Arrowhead and Gail Gordon. That was different.

I told Idaho, "I'm not selling."

"Ain't five thousand enough?"

"You haven't got enough."

He shrugged his shoulders, looking at me indulgently, as though he was dealing with a peevish kid. He pulled at his long white mustache, "You don't really figure, do you, that you can git away with it?"

I said, "Yes."

He continued to tug at his mustache, looking at me in a questioning, abstract way as though I were some new sort of bug he had never seen before.

I glared at him for a while but found it difficult to meet the untroubled look in the cool gray eyes. "Now look," I blurted out, "Just what are you going to do?"

Idaho's eyes flickered with amusement. "How would you like," he asked, "how would you like to jest ride out of here? Jest ride off?"

As plainly as though they were present I could see the flat eyes of Flack and could hear the high girlish giggle of that horrible Whitey. I said, "I wouldn't like it."

Idaho and I looked at each other, and suddenly we both

laughed. He put a gnarled hand and patted me on the shoulder in a fatherly way. "Take it easy, bub. Take it easy."

I had the quick feeling that old Idaho knew all about me, knew what I was thinking, knew what I wanted. I wished he could tell me how I was going to get it.

He said, "You and Slim and Saturnino hain't had much sleep lately. They're sleeping their heads off in the bunkhouse now."

"Thanks. And then how about my doing something to earn the thirty dollars a month and found the Arrowhead is paying me? How about learning something about the cow business? I'll need that when I take over the Arrowhead."

Idaho chuckled, "Sure you will. Sure you will." He looked at me quizzically, "Well now, there's that ditch."

"That will be very, very lovely," I told him.

Idaho went back up toward the main ranch house, and the Indian lad, Manuel, was standing beside me. I asked the lad, "Well, Manuel, what do you think?"

For an instant I saw that warm light in his dark eyes. He said, "I think yes."

"You may be right," I told him. He followed me up the steps into the shady gloom of the bunkhouse.

Saturnino was sprawled on his back on the bed sound asleep. Slim sat at the table dealing himself another game of solitaire. His hat hung on the chair post, and I was startled at the creamy whiteness of the upper part of his forehead. Below that white streak his face was almost black from sun and wind.

"Where's the Great Bellyache and the Big Spit?" I asked.

Slim looked at me blankly, holding a card suspended. Then he grinned. "Oh, you mean Fred and Garvey. Fred won't like that. Fred's gone back to camp, and Garvey is working on the ditch." He played two cards, then he said, "The Big Spit. And he ain't going to like that neither."

I said, "It's all very sad indeed," lay down on the bed I had

used before, turned my face to the wall, and listened to the big bluebottle fly banging down the window pane.

The banging of the fly seemed to grow louder and louder and take on a metallic clang. I grunted, "What the hell?" and realized I was listening to the clangor of Footless and his iron tire.

Slim had been asleep and was now sitting on the edge of the bed yawning and tousling his yellow hair. Saturnino had a hammer in one hand and some nails in his mouth. He proceeded to nail a saddle blanket over a window.

"How come?" I asked.

Saturnino's teeth flashed in the near darkness. "But, Petey," he said, "you sleep like the dead man."

I asked, "Why the chintz curtains?"

Slim said, "Too damn much fresh air. I ain't used to it." And that, I knew, what not the answer.

After supper I saw Slim going around the bunkhouse on the outside trying to look in the windows. When we were inside I again asked him, "Why the lace curtains?"

Slim said, "Saturnino has all of a sudden gone modest on us. He won't take off his pants unless the windows are blocked up."

But I knew the reason was they were afraid some one might take a shot through the lighted windows.

Garvey sat down handy to the fireplace, and Slim laid out his interminable solitaire. Saturnino yawned and stretched luxuriously and said, "But me, I make the big sleep."

Garvey spat, contemptuously. "You fellers can set up and mind the baby. I'm hitting the hay."

I was angry and started to ask, "Who's the baby?" but concluded it would be silly to start anything. "I'm going to bed and establish legal residence on my homestead."

Slim said, "Yeah, do that."

Garvey spat again. I had never known that a man could carry on a conversation by spitting. Garvey could.

Saturnino laughed, delightedly, "The Great Bellyache," he said. "And the Great Spit." But Garvey was rolling himself up in blankets and paid no attention.

I woke up once in the night. I don't know what time it was. Now Saturnino was sitting at the table dealing cards to himself. Slim was sprawled on a bed. I noticed he had not taken off even his boots. I was thinking of something I wanted to ask Saturnino, but the next thing I knew Slim was asking, "Hey, you buckos didn't die in the night did you?"

The blankets had been pulled away from the windows and it was growing light.

Just as we came out from breakfast there was a beam of blinding light from the eastern ridge. I watched a hot sun that seemed to suddenly cut loose from the hill and float upward into a brazen sky.

And if any one had told me that before that hot sun had set I should be practically in possession of the Arrowhead outfit I should have known he was definitely and completely mad.

Idaho said, "Well, bub, you and Garvey can git on with that ditch. Ought to finish today."

I said, "That's right. I want to get my ditch cleaned out."

Idaho chuckled. I expected Garvey to spit, but he paid no attention.

Garvey and I rode up from the corrals carrying long-handled shovels across our saddles. As we rode past I watched the windows for Gail Gordon but did not see her. I felt sure she was somewhere around, or Dolores would not have carried out rays of food. (Perhaps, I hoped, I shall see her this evening.)

Down in the shady tunnel under the cottonwoods Garvey spat angrily. He grumbled, "Them damn' pets sleeping their heads off in the bunkhouse."

I spoke placatingly. "Probably they got some work around the ranch."

• Garvey spat.

We rode out into the blistering sun, turned down to the left, and splashed across the little river. The bright, sunlit drops coming up around the horses were showers of diamonds.

Garvey growled, "Go on down to the lower end and work back. I'll begin here."

I said, "All right—" and then stopped to look up at the flank of the ridge to where the Sacaton City road came down to the Arrowhead. Manuel was there on a running horse, running wildly as Manuel's hand rose and fell with the lashing quirt. I asked, "What's up?"

Garvey didn't answer, and I looked at him. He had stiffened up in his saddle, heavy face stuck forward watching Manuel with intent eyes. I thought I saw absorbed interest and anxiety in his reddish eyes. I asked again:

"What is it?"

Suddenly Garvey whirled on me and snarled angrily, "What the hell you waiting for? Go on down there and start digging."

I said, "Oh, all right. All right, dear heart."

Garvey glared at me, and I thought for an instant he was going to spit right at me. I waited a minute and then turned the horse's head down river.

Looking back over my shoulder, I saw Manuel disappear under the cottonwoods. Garvey got slowly off his horse and stood a long time looking across his saddle back toward the ranch. After a while he shook his head as though giving it up, dropped his reins on the ground, and slouched over to the ditch.

I rode on down the ditch toward a grove of sycamores at the lower end of the alfalfa field. I thought that would be a good place to leave the horse in the shade.

It was cool and shady in the little grove of sycamores. The bright stream murmured pleasantly. I remembered what Andy Jackson, the young fellow with the rope, had said

about a big limb down in the sycamore grove. I looked for it.

It was as big as my leg, sticking out from the green and white trunk of a huge old tree. I wondered if it had ever been used to hang a man.

I dropped the reins and left the horse there in the shade. In the hot sun I worked at the ditch, running the long-handled shovel along the ditch, lifting it with a sucking noise, letting the muddy water run off, then whacking the shovel sideways on the lower bank to free it of sand and mud. Sometimes I had to stop and use a flat rock to scrape the wet shovel free of mud. Sweat made streaks of coolness running down my belly.

When I stopped occasionally, leaning on the long handle of the shovel, I could look up the ditch and see Garvey digging away. Even though I disliked him intensely I had to confess he was a persistent worker. Up the valley I could see the cottonwood grove that hid the Arrowhead. The only sound was the occasional metallic clang as Garvey banged his shovel against a rock. The flat sound was thrown back from the hill. It was all very quiet and peaceful.

I dug and sweated and dug again, and wondered when I would hear Footless hanging his iron rod on the wagon tire. Once, as I was looking at Garvey I noticed his horse. The horse had been standing facing toward the hill, one hip dropped and head hanging as though dozing in the hot sunlight. Now it suddenly lifted its head, alert with flicking ears, looking down toward me.

I looked over my shoulder at my horse. It had turned around and was now facing in toward the sycamore grove. Its head was up, and its ears pointed straight forward.

Perhaps, if I had been more experienced, I should have suspected something. I thought perhaps a cow had wandered down, and went on digging. Then I was surprised by the sound of the iron tire up at the ranch and very glad to hear

it. The clangor rolled along the hillside and lasted for a little after Footless had stopped.

Garvey had broken off a handful of sage and was carefully wiping his shovel. I did that too. I saw Garvey walk over to his horse, and when the animal did not turn quickly enough he gave a vicious yank on the reins. He mounted without paying attention to me. The sun glinted on his wet shovel.

I took a look at the ditch between me and Garvey and concluded we could easily finish it in the afternoon. Then I went down to my horse. Without thinking about it I noticed that he was still interested in something back among the trees. I walked over and picked up the reins, flicking them over the horse's head. Then I was startled to see a saddled horse.

I just stood and stared—stood and stared; and my memory seemed to be playing strange tricks. The saddled horse was a big bright bay. A big bay horse with a saddle standing there in the sycamore grove.

My memory told me things that I refused to believe. Such things couldn't happen. Such horrible things are impossible.

The sweat came on my face, ran down my neck, and was deathly cold when it struck my belly. My knees shook, and I was afraid they would buckle and I would collapse on the ground. I looked back over my shoulder and saw Garvey away up the ditch riding away from me.

I looked back at the big bay and knew I couldn't shove the truth away. I knew the horse very well. It was the big bay I had taken from the livery barn in Sacaton to ride to Tucson that night years and years ago. It was Flack's horse.

They say a man's whole life flits across his mind with startling clearness when he is drowning. Mine didn't. I felt only sheer fright. Fright and a sense of waiting for something.

It came then—that horrible girlish giggle of Whitey.

I had let go of the reins and now was tugging frantically

at the butt of my six-shooter. In the back of my mind were the words I had heard some one say: "Take your time. Take your time."

Then a voice growled: "Drop it! Put up your hands!"

The voice snarled again, urgently, "Put 'em up!"

Very slowly I let go of the butt of the six-shooter and raised my hands. Again Whitey giggled.

Whitey stepped out from behind a clump of brush. He had a six-shooter in his hand. His tight, thin-lipped mouth was grinning, showing yellow wolflike fangs. But the whitish eyes held a cold glare. He said, "I'll jest cut his throat."

The voice behind me snarled, "Not yet!"

Then Flack came walking out. He still wore his neat gray business suit. Under the coat I saw the yellow shine of cartridges in his gun belt. Without turning his flat head his eyes flicked around at Whitey. "Stop it, Whitey. We got use for him."

Somebody behind me moved, and then a great surge of relief swept over me as I saw Fred!

But the relief gave way to a still worse depression. It was Fred who had held the gun on me and ordered me to put up my hands. I blurted at him, "So, it was you who killed Joe."

Fred tipped his head back to look at me from under his hat brim, a look of contemptuous dislike.

I asked, "How much is Flack paying you?"

Fred snarled, "You talk too damn much." He took a step toward me, raising his six-shooter, and I thought he was going to beat me over the head with it.

Flack said, "Not yet." Then he asked, "Is Garvey out of sight?"

Whitey stepped out a little and looked. "Yeh," he said, "He's done gone."

Flack spoke briskly. "All right. Let's get going. Get the horses."

Fred walked over to me and yanked my six-shooter out of

the holster. He spun the cylinder to see if it was full, then tucked it inside the waistband of his jeans. He said, "You ain't going to need that no more."

I had still not recovered from the shock of seeing Fred with Flack and Whitey. I disliked him, but I had never dreamed he was like that. "So you sold out," I sneered. "And that was why you wanted them to hang me."

Whitey came leading the horses. He looked at my saddle and the rifle slung beside it. He patted my saddle, saying, "Nice new saddle. Nice new rifle. Them is mine."

Flack said, "You can come back and get them. Let's get going." Then Flack flicked his eyes around to me. He said, "You shouldn't 'a' mixed into things that were over your head."

Again Whitey giggled, his high girlish giggle that sent icy fear up and down my back.

Flack, Fred, and Whitey slid up onto their horses. Flack spoke to me. "Go on. Go and walk up the ditch. And don't try no funny business."

Well, I started to walk. I didn't know where I was going, nor why. I felt as men must feel when they start out on that last long walk to the gallows.

CHAPTER XV

I WALKED along the ditch with those three devils riding behind. I wondered at their coming out into the open like that. Then I remembered Fred. If they noticed us from the ranch

they would see Fred and think it was all right. But they were eating and probably would not notice us anyway. It was, I told myself, all a bad dream.

Just a bad dream from which I should soon wake up to see Slim prowling around in the dim dawn in the bunkhouse and hear him ask us if we were working there or just visiting. Yes, that was it, just a bad dream.

I heard Flack say, "We'll cross here."

Whitey was right behind me. He pulled his foot out of the stirrup, put it between my shoulders, and shoved. I stumbled but kept my feet and surged into the river. The cold water splashed up into my face. The water ran down into my boots.

Coming up out of the water the boots were heavy and my feet made curious squishing sounds. It was hard to walk with high-heeled boots full of water.

I turned my face over my shoulder and asked Fred, "How much does Flack pay you?"

Whitey kicked, viciously, at my face. I dodged that and stumbled and fell. Some of the water ran out of my boots, ran back up my body. It was bitterly cold.

Whitey cocked his six-shooter and giggled.

I said hurriedly, "I'll walk," and scrambled to my feet. Whitey giggled again. I felt a wild flash of devouring hatred for Whitey. He seemed to think it was funny. Deliberately, consciously, I wanted to kill him. Not so much, at that instant, to make my own escape as to feel the joy of killing him.

I suppose it was the degradation of being kicked around.

I had to think. To make plans. To be ready. What were they going to do, anyway? What could they do?

I turned to speak to Flack. "I'll sign that relinquishment now," I told him. I stopped and looked at him. That's the thing, I thought. Kill time. Make an argument. Kill time.

Flack flicked his hard eyes at me. "I won't need it," he said. "I'll be in Tucson tomorrow morning and make my own filing."

"You can have it for nothing," I hurried to say.

Whitey kicked his horse up and aimed another kick at my face.

Fred growled, "You talk too damn much. Git going."

I ducked Whitey's kick and had to run a few steps to get away from the feet of his horse. Then I was surprised to find that we were at the cottonwood grove.

We rode in among the trees, into green light and dim coolness of the shade. Flack said, "Wait."

I turned and he spoke in a low tone to me. "You go out there in the lane and walk up toward the house. We'll be right beside you under the trees. You make one false move and you get it right then. When you get up toward the house you start yelling. Yell anything you want to that will bring them out from the cookhouse. You get me?"

I said, "Yes, I get you."

I thought of them in the cookhouse eating dinner. Idaho, Footless, Garvey, Saturnino, and Slim, and the shapeless Dolores padding in after a tray of food for Gail. Gail Gordon. Oh, Gail, Gail!

They would come straggling out from the cookhouse, picking their teeth, come out one by one, idling down to the bunkhouse where they had left their guns.

But if I started yelling they would come out all together. All come out, in a group, without their guns, come out to die under the guns of Flack, Fred, and Whitey.

Flack asked me again, "You get me?"

I laughed at him, a reckless, despairing laugh. It was the end for me. "Yes," I told him, "I get you. And to hell with you!"

Whitey giggled. He had a knife in his hand and started to climb down off his horse. Flack and Fred had cocked six-shooters in their hands.

Whitey was drooling at the corners of his mouth. Slobber-

ing and looking at me with a happy insane glare in his white eyes.

Flack spoke in a dead voice that carried conviction, "You can go on up the lane or Whitey cuts your throat here."

I thought that if I looked at Whitey I should be sick. Kill time, I kept telling myself, kill time, and wondered where and when I had heard some one urging me, "take your time; take your time." That rang in my head now: "take your time; take your time."

"All right, all right," I told Flack. "I'll walk. Then what? What you going to do?"

Whitey reached out a claw at my shoulder. I saw the gaping muzzles of six-shooters and knew I couldn't hit Whitey. I shrugged away from Whitey's claw. "Oh, all right," I said, "I'll walk."

So I could walk up that land and yell for the Arrowhead men to come out and get killed and, also, I would be shot in the back. I wondered if it would hurt. I hoped then when they shot me it would be over very quickly. I told Flack, "You can't hurt Gail Gordon. You can't get away with that."

He said, "We ain't going to hurt her. Jest put her off my homestead."

Whitey was back on his horse, and now he aimed another kick at my face. I dodged it and walked out into the lane. Through that cool green tunnel I could see the row of hollyhocks that flamed along the front of the white house. I thought: Don't look at that white house—it will spoil your sight.

Then Flack spoke in a low tone. "Hey, you! Wait."

I looked at them over my shoulder. They had their three heads close together, talking things over in a low tone. Then they dismounted. Flack tied the big bay to a tree, and Fred and Whitey hung their reins over Flack's saddle horn.

I felt a sudden wild surge of hope that I could run, but I was looking into Whitey's six-shooter. Flack and Fred shoved

their six-shooters into their holsters and pulled the rifles from the scabbards. They watched me while Whitey got his rifle. I noticed Fred still had my six-shooter tucked inside his waistband.

Flack nodded at me and said, "Get going."

I started walking—walking and trying to think of something to do. Sweating and walking and trying desperately to think of something to do. And all I could think of was to wonder if it would hurt when the bullets entered my back. My back muscles were contracted and stiffened until they ached as if that would keep out the bullets. In utter despair I noticed I was halfway up the land and still had thought of nothing.

I looked at the three men over my right shoulder and saw them slipping along beside me, just outside the first row of trees, their cocked rifles in their hands.

A little breeze drifted down from the high peaks. The leaves of the cottonwoods rustled softly. Dad and Sister Jane and old Paulson would be up along the Maine coast now. And I should never see them again.

I noticed the V-shaped scars on the cottonwoods where long dead limbs had fallen off. On the smooth parts of the trunks there was a faint white powder, and I remembered that if you rubbed your hand there it would come away white. Like talcum powder, I thought, and almost gave a shout of hysterical laughter.

The breeze that had rustled the cottonwoods had died down. There was no sound now but the subdued rattle of my spurs. I began to wonder at the quiet.

I tried to remember if there had not always been something going on at the ranch. Something always going on to indicate life, to let you know that people lived and worked there. There was nothing now.

I could see the bunkhouse off to the right. The window at the end stared like a sightless eye. It was partly open, shoved

up a little from the bottom. There was no sign of life from the windows of the main house. The appalling glare of the sun lay over all.

I thought: When I come to the last trees I shall have to start calling—calling to them to come out, to step out idly and unconcerned to see who is yelling. And then, suddenly, I knew what I had to do.

Yelling at the house, even if I yelled about Flack and Whitey, would do no good. They would just come walking out, hands in pockets, asking me, "What you yelling about?"

But if they heard a shot! If they heard shooting? In my mind I could see them at the long table in the cookhouse, see their heads come up at the sound of a shot, see them look at one another for an instant—then come boiling out with guns in their hands.

That is it, I told myself— There must be shooting. My back stiffened and cringed as I thought of where those shots would go.

I looked at the trees on my left. Only a few feet, only a million miles. I couldn't outrun a bullet.

Then I heard Fred whispering and looked at them over my right shoulder. I heard Fred asking, "I can't hear nothing. Can't hear nothing a-tall."

That made me conscious again of the deathly quiet at the ranch. There should have been some sounds, horses snorting, the rattle of pans from the cookhouse. Everything seemed to have stopped, stopped to listen and watch.

I heard Whitey whisper, "By God, I don't like it!" Then he snarled at Fred, "By God, if you double-crossed us—"

Flack spoke soothingly, "Shut up, Whitey." Then I heard Fred say, "Hell, I killed Joe, didn't I?"

I tucked that away in the back of my mind (so Fred killed Joe!) and listened to Whitey again: "Yeah, and if you git us killed you'll be sitting sweet." I waited for his high, girlish giggle, but it didn't come.

Whitey, with his cocked rifle in his hands, was straining his eyes through the trees and up at the ranch house. He looked as if he felt trapped.

Then Flack spoke in a decided tone. "Get on with it." He motioned at me with his rifle, "Go on now, yell! Yell for—" His voice was choked off by the sound of a shot.

We stood frozen, listening, looking over our shoulders. Two more shots, far away, slammed against the hill. The shots were from down the river, down toward the sycamore trees where I had left my horse in the shade a million years ago.

Whitey snarled, "Well, by God—" Flack said, "They'll be coming now."

And I thought: I should have thought of it. I should have thought of it. Of course they were not alone. They will have a gang of hired killers behind them.

There were no more shots. We stood and listened for years and years. No more shots from down river and not a sound from the ranch. Fred said, "I don't like it."

Flack snarled, "Shut your mouth." Then he shoved the muzzle of his rifle at me and snarled, "Go on. Yell!"

I jumped to the left, for the refuge of a big cottonwood, snarling back at Flack, "You go to hell."

I heard a rifle go off. I thought somebody had kicked me in the back and then, stupidly, I saw a twenty-dollar gold piece rolling on the ground ahead of me. I couldn't understand that. I fastened my mind on the glittering gold piece rolling in the dust.

Shrill yells came from the half-raised window of the bunkhouse. Somebody was yelling, "Lay down! Lay down!" Yelling over and over "Lay down!" I wondered who they were yelling at.

Horses seemed to be running wildly up the lane. I saw Garvey come out from behind the bunkhouse, come out quite methodically, spit, kneel down, and then go to working

the lever of his Winchester. I screamed, "Don't shoot at me."

A stream of white smoke came out of the bunkhouse window as though it was the pursed mouth of a man blowing smoke rings. The sounds of shot slammed up against the hill and came back to drum at my ears.

I heard horses running, heard Whitey cursing and snarling. Somebody hit me a blow on the shoulder and knocked me half around to see Whitey put his rifle against Fred's belly and pull the trigger.

I heard Whitey's high girlish giggle and realized that I was yelling, "His shirt is afire. Fred's shirt is afire!"

The only thing I could think of was that Fred's shirt was afire and it would have to be put out.

My mouth was full of dust and I wondered how I got face down in the road. Horses were running, and men yelling. I saw Whitey and Flack going through the trees, looking over their shoulders with white, scared faces.

Then I was burning my hands beating out Fred's burning shirt. But Fred lay quite still, completely indifferent to his burning shirt. My hand came down on the butt of my own six-shooter still tucked inside Fred's waistband.

I saw Whitey stop and look at me, and a stream of flame and smoke came out of his rifle. On one knee I held the six-shooter in both hands in a panic of hurry, and in the back of my head were ringing somebody's words, "Take your time! Take your time!"

Whitey's rifle clicked. He cursed and threw it down. With incredible swiftness he had a spitting, bucking six-shooter in his hand.

It was ages before I saw Whitey's gun belt in the sights. Then I pulled the trigger.

The heavy six-shooter jumped back against my burned hand, and the smoke hid Whitey.

A rifle went off over my head, I heard a horse snort and a

man yell, and then I saw Flack stumble a few steps and lie down beside Whitey.

The man who had wanted to get a rope and hang me, the one they called Andy Jackson, rode past me on a snorting horse. He pulled up the horse to look down at Whitey and Flack. Then, very carefully, he let down the hammer of his rifle.

Andy Jackson rode his horse back toward me. He asked, "You all right?"

I got up on my hands and knees to snarl at him, "None of your damn business."

Then I found that I was blinking in the sunlight out in front of the ranch house. There were a lot of men there, men with rifles and six-shooters, men talking and laughing and looking at me. I heard Andy Jackson talking. "Yessir," he was saying, "he killed Whitey. Yessir, he shot it out with Whitey."

Then Footless yelled, "What'd I tell you? What'd I tell you? Slickest gunman in the Territory of Arizona."

Through a fog I heard somebody reporting to Idaho, "Yeah, we got all of 'em. Flack and his gang ain't no more."

I thought, So the Arrowhead boys were around here all the time, just waiting for it.

I said, "I heard Fred say he killed Joe."

Somebody said: "We weren't sartin sure. Had to be Fred or Flack. Then Manuel saw Fred join Flack this morning." I remembered Manuel on his wild ride down the slope.

Then I remembered the gold piece on the ground. I struggled away from a man who had his arm around me. "Leggo. Leggo." I snarled at him. "I got to find the money I dropped."

Somebody laughed, "Money?" As I turned I heard somebody say, "Hell! look at his belt!"

I found I had turned and was face to face with Gail Gordon. I tried to wipe the sweat out of my eyes and blinked at

her, and all the bitterness I had accumulated welled up in me. "If you want your damn' homestead," I snarled at her, "you can marry me!"

The more I thought of that, the better idea it seemed—and to hell with her. "Yeah," I snarled, "that would get you your damn' homestead."

I began to wonder at the stillness—at the stillness and the steady look in the girl's eyes. A warm wave of blood flooded up over her face. Her eyes held me. I heard her say quite clearly, "That is what I intended from the beginning."

Then somebody said, "Hey, look at his belt," and somebody was pulling at the back. Gold coins tinkled on the ground and Slim was squinting his eyes to read white papers in the sunlight. I heard him say: "His filing papers. All correct."

Then he read the other paper. He looked at me and read it again. Then Slim let out a great yell.

"Look! Look at this. The same day he filed he made out a relinquishment to Gail Gordon!" Slim was quite wild. "Look at the date!" he yelled. "Look at the date! It's the same."

Saturnino came into my eyes. His white teeth were flashing. "But what I tell you, Slim? What I tell you?"

I looked at Gail Gordon then. "That's all right," I told her. "You get your damn' homestead anyway. You don't have to marry me."

Her eyes held mine a long time. The deep blue seemed to turn black. They were unfathomable but warm, so warm. She walked over to Slim, saying, "Let me see that relinquishment."

She glanced at it, looked back at me, and a faint smile curled her lips. Then she tore up the paper.

Somebody said, "Hey!"

Then the man who was holding me took his arm away and looked at his hand. It was wet with red blood. He said, "For God's sake—"

Gail Gordon gasped. "Oh!" and called, "Dolores! Dolores, hot water and bandages."

I spoke into Slim's ears, "Yeah, something hit me."

Saturnino was laughing and exploring with deft fingers. "But yes," he was laughing, "the good Petey say something hit him."

A man said, "Look at the back of his belt."

Saturnino said, "But yes. The gold save his life."

Somebody laughed and said, "Many a time it has saved me."

Then Idaho was talking, "Only that hole in the shoulder. And that ain't bad."

I saw the girl going ahead toward the ranch house, and I was walking between Slim and Saturnino. I felt, suddenly, that I was very, very tired. I wanted to go to bed and to sleep.

Then I saw old Idaho pulling at his long white mustache and looking at me from warm gray eyes. "Well, bub," he was saying, "we are right proud to know you."

"But look," I protested and stopped to face old Idaho. "Now you got to give me a chance to learn something about the cow business."

This Bantam book contains the complete text of the original edition. Not one word has been changed or omitted. The low-priced Bantam edition is made possible by the large sale and effective promotion of the original edition, published by The Macmillan Company.

About

THE AUTHOR

W. H. B. Kent, who's been around, says writing "is the hardest work I have ever done."

The Western short story writer and novelist was born in Meriden, Connecticut, and attended Meriden High School, Wilbraham Academy, Cazenovia Seminary, and Syracuse University, graduating from none of them.

After compiling this dazzling academic record, he worked in the U. S. Forest Service for 12 years, dragging a pack outfit all over the West from Canada to Mexico. Then came three years in the Philippine Bureau of Forestry, where he worked in the Moro Province, Mindanao, and down the Sulu Archipelago.

He also has service in France with L Company of the 49th Infantry in the first World War, where later he was transferred to the Intelligence Department. After the war he came home, and "went back to the woods where I belong."

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